



Research Paper

Nature of Man Towards Infinite in Tagore's Philosophy

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ABSTRACT: In colonial period philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore plays an important role in shaping the then human condition of being oppressed, subordinated. In Tagore's philosophy the notion of man has been conceptualized in such a way that man can emancipate himself from utter hopelessness and despair. Indian mystic traditions help him a lot in doing so. For him man is not just a species in nature. He has something beyond natural instinct. Within the scope of finite and predictable natural behavior he has an urge to the infinite. In this paper this peculiar nature of man is discussed in the light of Tagore's philosophy.

KEYWORDS: human nature, finite self, infinite self, Tagore, surplus

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I. Human Nature

The main objective of Tagore's philosophy of man is to explore the mode in which man exists in relation to the world. Tagore views this relation basically from an aesthetic point of view. The aesthetic apprehension of reality forms the core of almost all his reflections on man and his world. The experiential forms in the process of human becoming were never conceived by Tagore in a detached and impersonal manner. As a poet he looked at the world as a composite whole charged with human meaning, the understanding of which requires human participation, and in communion with it.

For Tagore, human being is not merely a member of a species. Rather, he is a person with unique personality. Therefore, the relation that man holds with the world is personal. Here, 'personal' is not to be confused with 'private'. For his own demand, the personal man extends himself over the world through a creative synthesis and looks for a complement of his own being in the world. Tagore says, "I exist, and everything else exists. There is this union of the two in my existence. If I do not feel anything beyond my own self, I do not feel myself."ⁱ The truth of this kind of awareness has an integral character. It emerges from an in-between relational realm, of man and his world. It is revealed through an integration of man's being with the world. Here 'truth' means 'truthfulness' or 'being true', i.e. how truthfully I become myself in relation to the world. In this process of becoming, the world which is a mere congregation of impersonal facts and things is gradually replaced by a world of expressions. It is the personal man who expresses. In Tagore's philosophy of man, we find some key characteristic features which shape human personality indifferent manner. We are now going to discuss those one by one.

II. Finite-Infinite Nature of Man

From our discussion of Tagore's philosophy, it can safely be inferred that there are two sides of man's nature, one that is similar to animal nature and the other that is peculiarly man's. That man is different from animals does not mean that man has no concern with the physical. This difference can be explained in a different way. "The nature of an animal conforms to its condition. Its claims exceed what is due to it. With man it is different. He puts forward claims far beyond what was due to him by Nature."ⁱⁱ Tagore illustrates this with the help of an example. Friction produces fire; the animal accepts this. This the end for him. But man, on account of the 'extra', that is within him, is not satisfied. He asks, 'But why should friction produces fire?' Likewise, it on account of this extra that man puts questions like, 'Who am I?' 'What really is man?' This shows that there are two natures of man."ⁱⁱⁱ One nature of man obscures him, the other gives freedom."ⁱⁱⁱ

This is what is meant by the widely accepted thesis that according to Tagore man's nature is finite-infinite. "He combines in himself spirit and nature. He is earth's child but heaven's heir."^{iv} At one pole he is

confined within the natural laws, but in another pole he is separate from all and beyond the laws of nature. There he stands alone as an individual.^v Thus, if we look at selves in their true perspective, we shall find that there are, in fact, two selves – “the self which displays itself and the self which transcends itself.”^{vi} To display itself it tries to be powerful and big, to transcend itself it has to give up what it has. Tagore writes “There is yet another man in me – not the physical but the personal man ... the personal man is found in the region where we are free from all necessity – above the needs, both of body and mind, above the expedient and useful. It is the highest in man – the personal man.”^{vii}

The personal man is the man with surplus, free from all necessity. It is also called “the region of the superfluous”^{viii}, or “the selfless self” to put the truth in the form of a paradox. For Tagore, creation is self-expression. Surplus or the infinite dimension of man, is essentially communicative. “Inter-communication”, as Tagore says, and not the “narrowly self-contained loneliness”^{ix} is what marks the surplus frees self from the privacy of the life of the ego. Personality “is the sense of unity in one’s self, yet finds its real truth in its relationship of unity with others.”^x

The finite or the individual self does not have its complete meaning in itself. Neither is the infinite, apart from the finite, fullness enough; it is “as if it were naught.”^{xi} The mutuality of finite and the infinite makes for all the drama of creativity in human life. Tagore says, we are ever to become infinite, just as the river becomes the sea.^{xii}

According to Pabitra Kumar Roy, the orientation about the infinite is there in man as an ontological intentionality.^{xiii} For Tagore, the term ‘ma’ connotes more than it denotes. Adapting Sartre’s mode of speaking we could say that man is the will to be infinite. But Tagore’s anthropology is of no finalist character. There seems to be no reason for supposing why man’s self-discovery should culminate in a final event. What he means by man’s infinity is that no set of predicates can ever descriptively exhaust what the term ‘man’ implies. “The manifestation of man has no end in itself – not even now.”^{xiv}

Tagore analyzes the two verbs, *having* and *being*. The infinite, he says, is unattainable in the sense of possessing it, since ‘attainment’ implies the idea of possession. The infinite will necessarily have a large margin of the unrealized. But there is a mode of human experience which is delightful “not in the having but in a getting, which is at the same time not getting. In our deeper love, getting and non-getting run ever parallel.”^{xv} There is another pair of verbs, ‘is’ and ‘to be’. Man, for Tagore, is not complete; he is yet to be. His existence, his *isness*, is a closed fact, an actuality governed by necessity. “In his to be he is infinite, there is his heaven, his deliverance.”^{xvi}

III. Realizing Infinite

What is the ultimate Human destiny? Tagore says that it is the ‘Realization of the infinite’. But what would be the nature and status of man in this state? Man has to realize unity – that is the goal of his life, but what would happen after realization? Would man become different from what he is? Would that be a realization of the unreality and illusoriness of the world, and therefore of the unreality of the individual? Would the individual be completely lost in the One? How would that state differ from the state of death? These are some of the questions that have to be discussed now.

Materialists and the secularists think that death is the end and that there is no ‘beyond’. According to Tagore, death is not the extinction of life, it is not even a negative principle, it is a positive aspect of life. Man fears death because he takes it as alien to his nature, as something that would ‘attack’ everybody some day. But if death is taken as a natural and inevitable aspect of man’s life, death, instead of terrifying man, would add a charm and meaning to life. In fact life is a miser, it tries to hold everything in its grasp; death, on the other hand, is a lesson in giving away, it gives away life itself, but that is only to renew it in some other life. ‘Life is given to us, we earn it by giving it.’^{xvii} Thus, in spite of death, there is a continuity of life. Tagore says,

‘Thou hast made me endless,

Such is thy pleasure

This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again and fillest it over with fresh life.’^{xviii}

These lines give the impression that Tagore believes in re-birth. Tagore never makes any pointed reference to re-birth or to the forms of life after death. But this much is certain that he believes in the immortality of soul, and immortality means that soul survives death. It is futile to determine the forms of life that soul will assume after death, that we cannot determine. It is sufficient to say that Immortality consists in the continuation of the pure life-force through endless deaths, and this life-force gradually goes on becoming fuller and more and more perfect.^{xix}

But what is this state? It has been variously described – as immortality, as *mukti*, as soul-consciousness, as the realization of the Infinite. But what happens to the man when he attains this state? Tagore himself raises this question and then answers it. He writes, ‘What is this state? It is like a morning of spring, varied in its life and beauty, yet one and entire. When a man’s life rescued from distractions finds its unity in the soul, then the consciousness of the infinite becomes at once direct and natural to it as light is to the flame. All the conflicts and

contradictions of life are reconciled, knowledge, love and action harmonized; pleasure and pain become one in beauty, enjoyment and renunciation equal in goodness; the breach between the finite and the infinite fills with love and overflows; every moment carries its message of the eternal; the formless appears to us in the form of the flower, of the fruit; the boundless takes us up in his arms as a father and walks by our side as a friend.^{'xx} If we go behind the poetic elements of this passage, we shall be able to discern some descriptions of the characters and nature of the mukta. In this state, there is the consciousness of the unity of the soul which is also the consciousness of God in the soul of man, and this consciousness is natural and direct. All the heat and fret of life are finally quietened and contradictions are resolved. Now, there is a perfect harmony between knowledge, love and action, as a result of which, there is perfect peace and bliss. There remains no gap between the finite and infinite, and therefore, distinctions between pleasure and pain and between good and evil become irrelevant. Then there is the assertion that such a state is not an abstract state as every aspect of nature is actually felt to be pervaded by him. There are two implications of the description given above. Firstly, the ultimate human destiny lies in finding God, but that does not mean that we can find God as we find other objects. This is finding him in one's own inner being by removing all obstacles to this realization. He says, 'there is no question of searching for him in one thing in preference to another, in one place instead of somewhere else. We do not have to run to the grocer's shop for our morning light, we open our eyes and there it is, so we need only give ourselves up to find that Brahma is everywhere.'^{xxi}

Secondly, the above description of human destiny answers also the charge that is often brought against such descriptions. It is often said that the infinite is beyond our reach, that this is a goal that cannot be attained. On that account it is often described as something imaginary. Tagore says that the infinite is definitely beyond our grasp if the word 'attain' implies any idea of 'possession'. God cannot be possessed. We possess only those things which are smaller in comparison to us, and the very act of possession implies that we are greater than the things that we possess. Therefore, in the ultimate state of realization, man cannot possess God, he has a realization of the unity, infinity and omnipresence of God within himself.

This takes us to the consideration of a very pertinent and important question with regard to the nature of human destiny – a question which is important from the point of view of both metaphysics and religion. What is the relationship of God and the liberated man? Is there a complete mingling of the one with the other? Is man completely lost in the Infinite? Or, does he, in any way, retain his individuality?

Any step to solve these problems must be taken with caution, because there is a good scope for confusion at this point. Certain passages of Tagore's writings, where the poet has become more prominent than the thinker, might give the impression that in the realization of the Infinite there is also the realization of the unreality and illusoriness of the finite aspects of man, and that the ultimate human destiny is the realization of the pure one – of the complete identity of man and Brahma. Tagore says at places, that man has to become Brahma. If this interpretation of Tagore's view is accepted, then it would mean that the ultimate human destiny is the extinction of the distinctiveness of the individual. But the general trends of the thoughts of Tagore suggest – and suggest more or less clearly – that that is not human destiny. In 'realization' man's individuality is not lost. To say that the difference between God and the man is illusory or due to ignorance is just one attempt to explain the difference which is there, and which ever remains there. The mukta does not become Brahma, he shares in the Divine Joy by realizing Him within himself. To realize this unity it is not essential to be identical with God. Tagore says, 'We can know him in the love and joy we feel when we give up our self and stand before him face to face.'^{xxii} Again he says, 'We seem to watch the master in the very act of creation of a new world when a man's soul draw heavy curtain of self aside, when her veil is lifted and she is *face to face* with her eternal lover.'^{xxiii} Expressions like 'face to face', 'Eternal lover', suggest duality, duality of the lover and the beloved; but there is unity in duality. There is no contradiction here, the contradiction that appears to be there in the expression 'unity in duality' becomes resolved in love and joy. Tagore very emphatically says, 'There are many of us whose prayer is for dualism, so that for them, the bond of devotion with God may continue for ever.'^{xxiv}

We can appreciate this still better in terms of a Tagorian analogy. The river becomes the sea. There is a sense in which unity is established between the river and the sea, its motion finds its finality when it reaches the sea. It had been moving so long, but it cannot go beyond the sea. But there is a sense, again, in which they are different because the river can never make the sea the part and parcel of itself, it can never be called the sea, nor can it never be identical with the sea. Likewise, our soul also, in her movements, comes across things and moves away, but she cannot move beyond God. Once our soul realizes its 'ultimate object of repose' in Brahma, all its movements acquire a corresponding purpose. So, the soul becomes God, just as the river becomes the sea, but it cannot be identical with God just as the river can never be identical with sea. In fact, for man, religion is the truth – in devotion lies his reality; and Tagore prefers to retain this distinctness of man even at the cost of his identity with Brahma.

A very direct mention of this problem is made in *The Religion of Man*. He writes, 'In India there are those whose endeavour is to merge completely their personal self in an impersonal entity which is without any quality or definition; to reach a condition where mind becomes perfectly blank, losing all activities. Those who claim the right to speak about it say that this is the purest state of consciousness, it is all joy and without any object

or content. This is considered to be the ultimate end of yoga, the cult of union, thus completely to identify one's being with the infinite Being who is beyond all thoughts and words... Without disputing its truth I maintain that it may be valuable as a great psychological experience, but all the same, it is not religion, ... and *man is more perfect as a man than where he vanishes in an original infiniteness.*^{xxv}

That shows that the liberated man is not going to enter into a strange and mysterious world; only the ways change, the angle of vision changes, necessity gives way to freedom, egoism makes room for love and misery for joy. In the 'ocean' of joy the distinction between 'this shore' and 'that shore' disappears. Tagore raises this question and answers it. He writes, 'Where is the further shore? Is it something else than what we have? Is it somewhere else than where we are? Is it to take rest from all our works, to be relieved of all the responsibilities of life? No, in the very heart of our activities we are seeking for our end. We are crying for the across, even where we stand.'^{xxvi} Souls who have this realization, become 'the supreme flower of humanity'; in their lives other men perceive an embodiment of perfect love and joy and therefore pay their homage to them. Such men become the 'ideals' of humanity.

One more question relating to human destiny remains to be answered – the question of re-birth. Does the soul re-appear in human form after attaining realization? It is not easy to give a straight answer to this question, because Tagore's treatment of this problem is nowhere pointed and definite; but there are suggestions which may be regarded as answers to this question and which are not, in any way, inconsistent with Tagore's notion of 'human destiny'. It may be said that it cannot be explained with certainty or even definiteness that such souls become free from the cycle of births and re-births, nor can it be said again with definiteness that they have to be born for the benefit of mankind. He, who has been able to realize Him in his soul, becomes a partner in his 'Lila' – the game of Joy. So long as the soul remains the self, so long as the soul remains ignorantly forgetful of his unity with God, he misses this joy. Even though thus unity is basic, the soul, is ignorance neglects it. But once the unity is realized, everything changes radically, and soul begins to participate in the game of joy. Tagore says, 'the union is already accomplished. The *Parmatman*, the supreme soul, has himself chosen the soul of ours as his bride, and the marriage has been completed.'^{xxvii} 'And now goes on the endless Lila, the play of love. *He who has been gained in eternity is now being pursued in time and space, in joys and sorrows, in this world and world's beyond.*'^{xxviii} The sentence that has been italicised indicates that there is the possibility for the liberated soul to re-appear. It appears that Tagore does not like to enter into the question of the re-birth of the liberated, because after the realization of the final human destiny, this question becomes irrelevant. If the purpose of joy would be served by the re-appearance of soul, probably soul would re-appear. It would depend on the freedom of the partners in the game of love and joy to pursue this game in whatever forms they like. But the frequent use of the words like 'endless', 'ever', 'timeless', 'eternal' etc. wherever the question of life and death are discussed, shows that the possibility of souls re-appearance is not ruled out, only this would have to be remembered that all the services of such a soul would be services of love and all activities, activities of joy.

ⁱ "Sahityatattva"

ⁱⁱ Tagore, Rabindranath, *Man*, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore (Vol 3)*, edited by Sishir Kumar Das, Sahitya Academy, 1937 p.13

ⁱⁱⁱ *Man*, p.19

^{iv} Radhakrishnan S., *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, Macmillan, 1919 p.7

^v Tagore, Rabindranath, *Sadhana*, Macmillan, 1913, p.69

^{vi} *Sadhana*, p.76

^{vii} Tagore, Rabindranath, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Sishir Kumar Das, Sahitya Academy, p.349

^{viii} Tagore, Rabindranath, *The Religion of Man*, Macmillan, 1931, p.10

^{ix} *The Religion of Man*, p.96

^x *The Religion of Man*, p.96

^{xi} *Sadhana*, p.129

^{xii} *Sadhana*, p.135

^{xiii} *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, p.104

^{xiv} *The Religion of Man*, p.14

^{xv} *Sadhana*, p.129

^{xvi} *Sadhana*, p.132

^{xvii} Rabindranath Tagore: Stray Birds, (56) in *EWRT*

^{xviii} Tagore, Rabindranath, *Gitanjali*, (1), Macmillan, 1913

^{xix} In 'Ses Lekha' published for the first time in 1942 (June), the poet says,

'Death can not swallow life which is immortal

It only casts its shadow like Rahu

This I know for certain

That death is not the ultimate expression of the changeless

This I know for certain'- Wings of Death'.

Last Poem of Rabindranath Tagore by Tr. Aurobindo Bose, pp. 85-86.

^{xx} *Sadhana*, p. 43.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 148.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 37.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, p. 43.

^{xxiv} *The Religion of Man*, p. 202.

^{xxv} *Ibid.*, p. 117.

^{xxvi} *Sadhana*, p. 162.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, p.160.

^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, p. 161.