

PHILOSOPHY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

The tendency towards a newer and fresher reconstruction of Indian Philosophic thought has been noticeable during the past two decades. In India the impetus was given by the fresh thought infused by Christian Civilization. At times such an infusion has the effect of annihilating the original thought of the country wherever such thought is weak and irrational. At other times and places, it has the opposite effect of provoking fresh thought conflict. Every conflict has also the effect of making one probe deeper into one's own thought, and when this conflict is intellectual, without being dogmatic, it stimulates assimilation. This has been the case wherever the thought which was provoked by this Christian conflict was strong and profound—as in India.

Thus stimulated and thrown on the defensives the Indian philosopher diving deep into his own culture and thought, brought to the surface several tendencies, quite old but now re-lived in his own being. Thought that soared without a material foundation now tried to find its bed-rock in human life and being. It is characteristic of Rabindranath's philosophy to call it the '*Religion of Man*'.

In his Religion of Man, Rabindranath sketches beautifully and arrestingly the way of expression of the Universal Spirit—within the conditions of space and time. He shows that the Spirit had at first taken the quantitative direction and found at last a quantitative mass-infinity undoubtedly an infinity but as far from real infinity of Spirit. Mere mass without integral organization leads of to disruption and results in the giving -up of beauty and simplicity for the sake of gorgeousness and unnecessary, unwieldy and uncouth decoration. This could be seen in forms of the pre—historic monsters. Their very size prevented them from protecting themselves against attacks from less massive and more lithe and better organized creatures. Spirit bloated and grew vast as it were misinterpreting its own fundamental nature of intensive infinity. But checked and prevented from growing vaster by the very fact of the survival of the fittest and made to recognize that size by no means makes for efficiency in deference, there originated an orientation towards real evolution of spirit which is

conscious interiority and intelligent adjustment. Man's evolution as a spiritual being was assured thereafter and coherent organization became the chief character of evolutionary history. Real power consists not in size but in organization and intelligent direction. As this development progressed, we may say that the unfolding of the main purpose now pronouncedly became human instead of remaining natural. The natural passes over in its conscious character into the human. Therefore does man start with the artificial by reconstructing conditions far from those of the animal (for that has been civilization) only shows that the spiritual end has been the transformation of the unconscious organization into the conscious. It is not true to say that human destiny is at cross-purposes with that of Nature. Natural process and human organization are but one continuous enfoldment of the self-same purpose of Spiritual Life. The natural process and human organization tend to the expression of the Divine- God. The highest truth of man is the full creative expression of himself in the light of eternal Life of Man, the man himself universalized. From the repetitive and the imitative instinctive-life, through all the sorrows and defeats, the spirit in nature tries to follow this trend up towards the complete exemplification of this purpose of Spirit is Man (purushottama) who is the goal of individual human beings. (Upeya).

If we are confronted with the question whether or not we should take present human beings as representative, in however little measure of the universal, we must admit that man is yet unborn, but thought unborn he is yet with us in our inmost purposes, and wherever man has caught the purpose of universal life, he has to that extent become the true man-a universal being. Not in his primitive desires which are as yet animal because unconscious expressions of an urge towards his true nature, (every urge within the human breast and animal life but the expression of the spirit within, struggling to release its meaning and life), but in his rationalized consciousness which recognizes the greater and the All – 'surplus'. This is the purpose and goal of individual life. Reason is universal and truly spiritual, and reason in man is the sure code guide towards universal Life. This Reason, however, is not the intellect which tries to thwart the main ends of universality but confines itself to particular ends, but it is intuition which is the appreciator of the harmony of life and its meaning and which guides the conduct of man accordingly. We find, thus, that Rabindranath holds the humanistic thesis that the goal of the world or cosmos is human and that its realization is a possibility only

when the individuals act consciously towards the fullest exemplification of the Universal Man. This inner realization or consciousness of Man is essentially the recognition of oneself.

Some people hold that evolutionary history is a fantasy and an illusion. It has no reality. It is mere appearance. In fact, they even go to the extent of saying that the individual human being himself is an illusion, caught up in an illusion, trying to reach an illusion. Rabindranath holds that the individual souls are not illusion, that the world of which we know is certainly not an illusion, though it is an appearance—quite a different thing. It is an intimation of the more real thought by itself and in itself if it is as yet un-understandable. To deprive truth of its appearance is to deprive it of its best part. “When you deprive truth of its appearance, it loses the best part of its reality. For appearance is a personal relationship, it is for me ... “This appreciation which seems to be the surface but which carries the message of the inner spirit” is something that cannot be denied reality because it is the only manner we can know the real at all.

To create an opposition between reality and appearance is to misjudge the nature of reality. It is due to the perversity of intellectual obscurantists and abstractionists turned mystical, that such a change has been maintained and human values sacrificed. Rabindranath, though an intuitionist, does not sacrifice, as pseudo—mystics have done, the world of values. To him the human values are absolute truth. He does not join the intuitionists who maintain that in some sense the reality which is experienced or the appearance is a distorted or segmented reality. The charge which Bergson levels against intellect as the fundamental instrument of mind which has an innate separate and utilitarian bent and which therefore distorts reality to further the ends of practical life is only partially true. Bergson has greater influence on modern thought. His intuition resembles superficially the integrative consciousness of Hindu thought, and facile writers on Indian Philosophy have adapted his description without looking deeper into it. Intellect has the primary and inevitable tendency to abstract experience and to contemplate on those abstracted experiences, which also abstracted, lose life and movement, their peculiar individuality and completeness. When it is exercised to its fullest, it becomes a satisfying instrument neither valuable

nor practicable. But when it is used within limits for the purpose of understanding, it becomes defining and analyzing activity. But such a definition and analysis can be valuable only when one has complete knowledge of the object. The real then has to be understood as a whole and not in segments. Knowledge of it can be complete only when its unique character is realized. To enter into the object and understand it as a whole is the way of intuition. The whole is a definite uniqueness, not a vague undefined experience, though to describe it by words may not be possible. When Bergson calls Intuition 'intellectual sympathy', he means intellect as limited in its tendency and as having for its main purpose wholeness and completeness, and as characterized by emotion or instinctive dynamism.

1. Faith of a Moralist, A.E. Taylor Vol 1, p. 346

2. Introduction to metaphysics . Bergson

Intellect can be abused as much as intuition can be. Everything is sanctified or defiled by the goal to which it tends. Instincts are proclaimed holy when they aim at the liberation of true values within the individual life. Reason, then, must apply to experience and evaluate it, draw out its significance and express its inmost aspiration. It is only then that it becomes truly spiritual. To hold that intellect and intuition are opposites, emergents out of life which contradict and thwart the purpose of each other, is to hold a view which is damaging to philosophy and to life alike. Nor are action and thought contradictories. Pragmatism is perfectly right when it affirms this criterion of workability. Only it fails to see the real springs of practical action. Ultimate knowledge is really a synthesis, a synthesis of thought and action. This knowledge will lead not to the abstract impersonality of knowledge and reality but to the concrete personality of reality. Reality is a synthesis, a whole that ought to be apprehended as a Whole – not merely as nature, nor merely as spirit but as a unity comprising both the subjective and the objective. In man as a psycho-physical being, it finds its first resolution of this dualism of the subjective and the objective.

The objective - view of the scientist is a partial representation of the whole. The Scientist is too preoccupied with the constancies in nature, its laws of causality and regular occurrence. He tries to discover those impersonal principles of nature that order it. He certainly does not know the future but he can deduce or calculate the chances. But the fact of chance always makes him uncertain as to the individual events happening one way or the other. The past is capable of exact determination but the future is pregnant with the impossibilities of today and of the past. The nature of the world seems therefore incapable of any purely mechanical explanation.

The subjective world-view on the other hand depends only upon one's personal whims and fancies. Having constructed a world of imagination the individual seeks to live in his own creation. The individual thus concentrated in his own person, living an isolated life, unrelated to other lives ends in a life of glorified fantasy of egoistic existence. The world, according to the subjective thinker is individual creation, having no objective or trans-subjective reference. But even he finds that there is such a thing as objective commonness in existence, which is referred to as identical by all beings, even if such an identity is only for the sake of practical life. This objectivity is affirmed of the world with respect to the individual selves who experience it, because it is obvious that the individual knowledge is too little and narrow to enable him to create a universe more than himself. Even subjective Idealists like Berkeley also maintain that there must be a Spiritual Being greater than the individual whose creative fancy this world is. This they call God. Therefore, we find that the subjectivist tends more and more to the recognition of a greater and an All who alone fashions and creates this world, and has as his fundamental nature creative activity. Before His manifestation we are nothing, and our understanding of Him fails to grasp the plan of the unfoldment of His Nature.

The objective world also strives to gain significance through subjective life that so fashions it as to express the sure purpose of Spirit. There is an inner pulsation within it that seems to vibrate in unison with the purpose of human Life: else it would

not be possible to organize it. Within it Spirit is struggling to express itself. Its very orderliness (which some idealists think is imposed by man's schematizing mind) suggests the organized nature of its being. The world, therefore, is spiritual not because its substance is spirit (spirit is no substance here but purposive governing activity), but because its order and unfoldment are coterminous with the world of the subject and his ideals. The world is ideal because its ground is in something which is forcing expression in and through its texture. This ethical trend within its being is what makes even the most hardened realists affirm the ideal character of reality. Idealism is true only when we understand it in terms of ethical life, not in terms of the philosophers of Absolutistic schools of thought who somehow call themselves idealists.

This possible organization of the objective world by the subject is a conscious process – a process which is planned by the individuals who have recognized this ideal as the goal of Man. In personality, then, the resolution of subjective individualism and objective impersonalism take place. The Personality of Man attains its fullest scope and measure when its infinity is realized within the finite, when the absolute values of Spirit are adequately represented and assured within the relative.

For, "Man has found out the great paradox that what is limited is not imprisoned within its limits; it is ever moving and therefore shedding its finitude every moment. In fact, imperfection is not a negation of perfection ; finitude is not contradictory to infinity ; they are but completeness manifested in parts, infinity revealed within limits."

What exactly is this ideal nature? Is it something that is far-off and somehow influencing the world-process ? Rabindranath holds the view that the Ideal Man is constantly immanently sustaining the process of the revelation of His Being in terms of the relative and the finite. Such sustaining may be compared to the teleological immanence of Spirit of Aristotle's theory. We are conscious of this Ideal in our most lucid moments, in our appreciation of art and nature, in Beauty, in other words, in the sacrificial moment when we offer ourselves entirely for the person we love, in the expression of our truth which is direct and unequivocal, and in the justest acts of equity.

We cannot deny that which we feel so surely. Even the most extreme of the amoralists and immoralists cannot deny that life is governed by such principles as beauty, truth and equity, because we know in the depths of our being that we are thoroughly governed by such Ideals. We even affirm that the Ideal is immanent within us sustaining our very life. The more consciously we express and the more consciously we are guided by this ideal power, the more we become men, or as Tagore would express it, Man.

The arguments of Tagore therefore, for the existence of God are cosmo—teleological as well as ontological

But to be able to express our faith in God we have to be conscious of our real Self.

“We have our personal self. It has desires which struggle to create a world where they could have their unrestricted activity and satisfaction. While it goes on, we discover that our self-realisation reaches its perfection in the abnegation of self. This fact has made us aware that the individual finds his meaning in a fundamental reality comprehending all individuals – the reality which is the moral and spiritual basis of human values. This belongs to our religion. As science is the liberation of our knowledge in universal reason, which cannot be other than human reason, religion is the liberation of our individual personality in the universal person who is human all the same.”

Thus the ideal of reason which science lays down, is the liberation of itself from finite and relativity ; the ideal of love is the liberation of the individual love from the finitude of its individual relations or selfishness. Sometimes one feels that this must be a progressive process—this release of the individual love from the bond of individual relationship, even as the body of scientific laws goes on liberating itself from the relativity to which it is restricted by the very nature of experience. It must, however , be

remembered that in Science there is an objective impersonality which integrates itself with other laws of science, equally impersonal. But the movement of love is, on the other hand, personal ; and its enlargement does not lead to impersonal contemplation but to concrete expression towards all. There is an ascent to perfection – a gradual liberation by the submission of our wills to the sovereignty of the Universal will, which is universal Love. There is a gradual submission of our desires to the happiness of the family; the family is sacrificed for the happiness of the nation, the race, and finally, Man.

All sacrifice is inevitably attended with pain. But even pain becomes a valuable asset, it becomes the measure of our Love. All suffering is due to the inability to sacrifice oneself –or rather to adjust oneself to the perfect Ideal which constantly seeks expression through us. This pain is the intrinsic quality of sacrifice , is indeed, the joy of love and giving for the sake of Man. Humanity must realize this Universal will and submit to its greatest expression which cannot be expressed in terms of human experience.

The voice of Conscience might be considered to be the chord which catches the rhythmic vibrations of the Universal Mind. The voice of beauty, the call of Truth, is the same for all, in the sense that it manifests the universality of its nature. So, it is absolutely certain that there is a universal Mind which works through the relative finite centres or selves. No less imperative is the call of Love.

“Want of love is a degree of callousness: for love is the perfection of consciousness. We do not love because we do not comprehend, or rather we do not comprehend because we do not love”.

The private individual has to shed his privateness and assume universal significance which is that of the Universal Person.

The Upanishad says "Know thou the one soul. It is the bridge leading to the Immortal Being. This is the ultimate end of man, to find the One which is in him; which is his truth, which is his Soul ; the key with which he opens the gate of spiritual life, the heavenly Kingdom."

The freedom which characterizes moral life is really the freedom of the Spirit which has assumed several modes of expressing the infinite in terms of the finite. To ask why there is so much suffering if there is a God or a universal Being is to ask a question of inconsequence. The freedom of the individual is a condition necessary for the creative life of spirit. Craving for uniformity, men create a state of uniformity ,but it has not attraction of distinction nor the richness of beauty, nor the rhythm of music. All true love is characterized by joy, and that is because all love is soul-offering. All true co-operation is based on the free acceptance of love which cannot be brought into being by force. If there is freedom which sometimes ends in severance of relations-independence-it is because there is another element which forces the individual into loving and union. But the element of severance is, according to Tagore , only an appearance, and the element of union is the ultimate truth. Anarchy that regions in the moral life of the individual is a condition precedent to real co-operative life, the life of love. Just as we have to pass through 'the valley of the shadow of death' to attain to Happiness, we have to pass through the stage of severance ere we attain to Love.

The more we adjust our ends to the universal goal as revealed by our conscience (which is not to be mistaken with the norms and standards of life but which in some measure expresses the fundamental universality of the values of truth, love and beauty) the more we become truly free.

Then the Godhead becomes one with the individual, the infinite is revealed in the finite mind. This could be possible only if the universal Being is really human and not the phantom of intellectual philosophy. God is a person of universal significance, whose nature is Love and Beauty. His relation to men is integral, or organic.

“It is only the Vaishnava religion that has boldly declared that God has bound himself to man, and in that consists the greatest glory of human existence. In the spell of the wonderful rhythm of the finite he fetters himself at every step and thus gives his love out in music in his most perfect lyrics of beauty.’

It is because the personality of God is human, there is possible the *rapport* with the Infinite All. It only means that God’s Personality is superior to the impersonality of the logical Absolute. The impersonality of God is his Truth-aspect. God interpreted through Logic appears to be an abstraction, a concept. But God understood in terms of value, of moral life and religion is personality.

“Some modern philosophers of Europe who are directly or indirectly indebted to the Upanishads, far from realizing their debt, a negation of all that is in the world. In a word, that the infinite being is to be found nowhere else except in metaphysics. It may be that such a doctrine is to be found and still is prevalent with a section of our countrymen. But that is certainly not in accord with a pervading spirit of the Indian Mind”.

The metaphysical Absolute is a result of pure scholasticism. It is a tenet held by none except the intellectualist thinkers. All religious thinkers accept no such description of God. Nor is the destination of man the abstraction of the Absolute. There is not the slightest evidence to support the view that increasing understanding, sympathy and co-operation tend to make real personalities disappear. It is only those who have developed the fundamental persistence of immortal existence. “It is precisely the stability and originality of people of character that keeps the world from stagnation,” say Rabindranath. The truth of our private selves does not lie in our idiosyncracies but in the moral nature of the freedom that we possess and exercise.

Rabindranath believes in the Joy of existence. He accepts the Unity of all things, *Advita* the Absolute Divine All. In God according to Rabindranath the super-personal God en rapport with individual God manifests himself in the parts. But no part can absorb the whole. The part cannot defeat the ends of the whole by the accentuation of itself. It must

subordinate its individuality to the whole; if it does not, it perishes. Civilization is the continual discovery of the transcendental Humanity or God. All men, therefore should try to live for Man, for it is His Joy that the world reveals.

Therefore is the significance of the parts and the snatches of finite experience realised only when we go beyond the purely partial, and investigate the purpose for which the parts stands, not merely in order to plan out the whole as the metaphysician or the geographer does. It is only the artist who sees the All and the One, and understands the goal of human existence. Without the vision of the All, we are certain to sink down in the morass of internecine quarrels, and Civilization would become nothing other than selfish enterprise. The Artist is the real Seer, he sees beyond the temporal and the fragmentary and the temporal. The Poets and the Artists alone can save the world, for theirs is the Vision of Beauty, Truth and Bliss. They alone can plan the future with sympathy and true Love. They alone, having intuition, perceive the Man sub specie *eternitatis*, whilst the individual beings look at it in fragments.

Rabindranath has taken upon himself the task of planning such an education and his International University at Bolpur aspires to bring into being a culture which shall reflect the Man and not any particular individual or nation or race. Not the renunciation of life but the fulfillment of Life is immortal Joy and unending beauty. That should be the main aim of Knowledge. The world is the Creative Excellence of the Man, the Lila, play of Divine Perfection.

In evaluating Rabindranath's Philosophy, at the very outset, it must be said that it makes no pretence at offering a complete exposition of the moot-points of intellectual philosophers. In spite of its poetic character, there are certain features that demand attention and appreciation even, from the intellectualists.

There is a spiritual purpose, says Rabindranath, that runs through the ages. This Purpose is Man. Rabindranath's theory does not, however, clearly explain how the Divine Mind finds projection in the individual. Rabindranath assumes that this perfection of Man will find its fullest expression in an altogether utopian order of existence where the intellectual and the intuitive cooperation of all the several peoples of the world shall reign supreme and the peoples shall give to one another their particular riches of spiritual experience. Thus the completest Deity comes into being. Man, then is the whole Universe of existence come to complete expression in human terms. Two interpretations are possible here. We may conceive of the whole universe as the One Purushottama appearing diversified but yet holding the unity which is the very nature of His Spiritual existence. The several individuals, then, are parts somehow, reaching beyond themselves, even as our individual organs strive for the maintenance of the unity of the body,-- to express the infinite purpose of the Deity, whose instruments they become. A more conscious realization of the interdependence of the parts and the whole makes for complete Oneness. It is necessary in the case of human beings that the unconsciousness that is a characteristic of functioning of the organs of the body must give place of the conscious and deliberate offering of the several parts of the life of the whole which is Man.³ The other alternative is the Divine expresses Himself fully each of His perfections

³Plato affirms that the world only mirrors the eternal Ideas and this mirroring is an imperfect and unreal manifestation. Rabindranath is a realist and does not accept that the world is illusory. Plato holds that the

individually, and in each individual he is complete and full. The Goal of the Process is then Society. Rabindranath inclines to the former view. The Goal is Man. Here again we have two alternatives. (1) Should the surrender of the parts to the whole be made once and forever? This course has a parallel in the Social contract theory of Hobbes or (2) should the surrender be a conscious endeavour at every moment of individual existence? The former surrender becomes nugatory after a time for there is no love and real affection but mere habit, the latter love and real affection but mere habit, the latter becomes the real revealing affection to the unity of the whole.

The description of evolution by Rabindranath has novel features. It is quite distinct from anything that we know of in India or western thought, and effectively reconciles several western theories.

Evolution of Spirit into Matter and a return to itself through its texture is the real Thought of the East. The summit of this return is Man.⁴ The immanent urge within matter is Spirit. How this urge expresses itself through extension at first and then by a return to its intensive character has been explained. Rabindranath

Pure Idea God, the Highest Essence can be known only by discovering the essences in existence and subsuming them under the most universal Being. Rabindranath affirms the realization of the pure Being in the values of the universe, of space and time. It is not through intellectual generalization that will lead to the Concrete Universal Being, Man, but the loving that surrenders to the All. The Universal is other than the general

This concept is the most intriguing in Rabindranath. Whatever he means this to be identical with the Leviathan of Hobbes or with the Utopia of the Anarchists; whether the Absolute of Bosanquet or the World of souls who have attained co-operative freedom is not quite clear.

Concurs with the view of those thinkers who have been deeply influenced by Aristotle, viz Bergson, Lloyd Morgan, and General Smuts.

That Spirit as vital energy fashions and creates new forms or patterns of life for the purpose of expressing itself adequately and that the progress of evolution is guided by the principle of adequate expression of Spirit is the main thesis of these thinkers. Lloyd Morgan and Bergson agree in so far as they posit new forms of spirit as reflex, instinct, intellect, and intuition. We cannot derive any one of these forms from the rest, though they are equally manifestation of the identical Elan. Tagore does not however, visualize the emergence of these forms clearly. He seems to follow

Bergson in so far as the impeding of one form of Spirit by another is concerned, though not with respect to all forms of Spirit. The quantitative movement of Spirit impedes the qualitative. He follows more closely Yadava Prakasa's cleavage theory of evolution. Originally spirit began to function in the direction of quantitative infinity- and matter was the result. When it began its movement towards intensity and qualitative infinity, it created Life and man. Its final expression through Man is the transcendent – over humanity—God. The original matrix of existence is the Absolute Undifferentiated Spirit. In the theory of Yadava, the cosmic process is immediate, and sudden. In Rabindranath it is closely linked with time. In both theories, the identity of the One Spirit becomes the unity of the three in relative existence, and by becoming such it reveals an intenser harmony and humanity. More so in Rabindranath's Philosophy.

The theory of Raabindranath does not account for the nature of the many-ness of the individuals as fully and satisfactorily as maybe desired. But his theory of sacrifice of less perfect individuals for the purpose of the most perfect being, Man, deserves consideration. General Smut explains that in evolution less perfect wholes are subsumed under larger and more perfect wholes. The completer whole reveal some peculiar characteristic over and above the qualities of lesser wholes, that compose it if not altering them. There is visible a newer function emerging from such an inter-relation of wholes. Functionally, its activity is not the mere sum of the functions of the units which form it. At first, in evolution, small cells (unicellular organisms) are independent units. Later they group themselves to form more complex bodies with diversified functions. these groupings brings into being functional characteristics like instinct, intellect, consciousness, and intuition. These functional characteristics are therefore the quality of the wholes, the more complex and diversified, the more dominant and delicate are these forms of spiritual activity. The highest is the organization on the physical basis of wholeness is the human body. These units now progress towards the still more complex spiritual units, the family,. Society, community, State, and finally, Deity. The last is the completest personally, the most real and perfect whole. Its nature is transcendent to anything contained in the several units. in an ideal sense the Deity as the spirit moving towards the whole is immanent

at every stage of the process. In Rabindranath's theory, however, the Ideal is more powerfully present. His idealistic tendency is greater, and resembles strongly the Hegelian. If we can compare this Ideal Deity with Man, Narayana, we have not only the explanation of Evolution but also the realization of the Most perfect whole, the Supreme Personality, God who is organic with the world.

It is not clear in Rabindranath's philosophy whether he means the ideal implication of the parts in the whole, or the natural biological implication of the units in the whole as in Smuts' theory. Rabindranath speaks about the sacrifice of the individual units for the gradual realization of the unity of the family, community, nation, state, universe, each in turn being sacrificed for the sake of MAN. Rabindranath does not mean to annihilate the individuals or communities, but he intends to make them whole, so as to bring into being the Ideal expression of MAN.

As a Seer, Rabindranath sees this ideal purpose of Man, as a poet he sings about Him, for this perfect being is not a mere emergent possibility but an actual fact when we Love deeply, truly and spontaneously. Evil and chance are not the truth of existence. Despair is not the last word; tragedy is not the highest summit of spirituality. Delight through sacrifice is the highest truth of existence. All this world is the Lila, the creative Delight of Man -- to Him who Sees this within Himself.