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**Indian Philosophical Aspects and the Theme of
Devotion in Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali***

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Indian philosophy includes the ancient wisdom of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, Vedas and ideas from Buddhism and Jainism, among others. Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* embodies most of these aspects of Indian philosophy. The major theme in *Gitanjali* is devotion to God. This paper focuses on the Indian philosophical aspects and the theme of devotion in Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*.

Gitanjali focuses on the all-pervading presence of God everywhere. *Gitanjali* brings its readers into direct contact with the Infinite. *Gitanjali* proclaims that God is neither an abstraction, nor an incarnation, but an ever-present force and an all-pervasive influence. He is to be seen in the various forms of nature including humans.

The Lover and the Beloved: Devotional Poetry

According to S. Radhakrishnan (1999), the poems of *Gitanjali* are the offerings of the finite to the Infinite. The relationship between the two is conceived as that of love between the lover and the beloved. The mystics all over the world use this analogy and it is constantly used to express the true relationship between the human soul and God.

The central theme of *Gitanjali* is devotional. It is in the great tradition of devotional poetry centering on the love of Radha and Krishna. The human soul is spoken of as Radha or the beloved waiting for the arrival of the lover or the bridegroom, Krishna. It is a drama of love, which takes place between Radha and Krishna. Radha, who surrenders everything to Krishna, symbolizes the human soul and the terrestrial Universe yearning with reckless passion for union with God.

Samsara, Human Birth and the Status of Humans

According to several strands of Indian philosophy, to take on the human form of life is a rare privilege for souls. Souls get human body only after evolving through an infinite number of births as lower species.

It is claimed that, only in human form, the living entity has the intelligence to understand divine laws and thus the soul could hope to free itself from the cyclical bondage of births, deaths and re-births. It is asserted that the soul has the ability to reach God, only after being born in a human body.

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou
emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life. (G1)

In song 1, Tagore talks about the immortality of the soul. Human soul is eternal and immortal and it is the will of God that it should be so. Human body is like a weak vessel,

constantly renewed. Man dies and is born in another form. This implies the theory of incarnation of soul after death.

Gitanjali and Gita

The lines from *Gitanjali* can be compared with *Bhagavad Gita*.

As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones
The soul similarly accepts new material bodies giving up the
old and useless one. (BG. 2:22. Verses are cited from Prabhupada 1987.)

Self-realization is the highest wisdom, which can be achieved through a varied experience over the ages. The soul must travel far and wide and take many births and gain much and varied experience before it can realize the truth that God is immanent and is present everywhere.

The Truth of Divine Immanence

In his book *Indian Philosophy*, S. Radhakrishnan (1927) observes:

The ultimate truths are truths of spirit, and in the light of them actual life has to be refined (*Indian Philosophy* 1.25)

Tagore says that through wide experience and spiritual discipline the truth of divine immanence can be realized. Through God's grace, man realizes his self and finds that God is within him and not outside.

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said
"Here art thou!" (G. XII)

Where Is God? Get the Answer After Long and Varied Experience

Tagore says that man cries out of his ignorance and asks "Oh, where is God?" It is only through wisdom gained after long and varied experience that his question is answered. Then he is assured of the fact that God is within him and that God is in every object of nature. Man gets real happiness only when he realizes the presence of God within himself and others.

Tagore believes that all the desires that perplex and bewilder men are entirely false and meaningless, as they cannot satisfy and give happiness and peace to him.

S. Radhakrishnan (1999) acknowledges this:

Only the infinite can satisfy the soul. (p. 108)

The Role of Attachment

An important element of traditional Indian philosophy is that all the trouble in the world is caused by attachment. Tagore says that attachment to persons can be turned into pure love if we train the mind to look upon those persons as different forms of God. God is in

every one and so a devotee should do his duty to his relatives, but his love for them should be transformed into pure love based on seeking God in all of them.

If a devotee does like that, then there will be no attachment even if he moves closely with his relatives and remember them often. S. Radhakrishnan in *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* says:

If their love has its absolute center in creatures, whether brute or human, there will be misery, and they will suffer from disappointments through sickness, death and separation. But if they have the consciousness of the infinite personality in the center and background of their personal life, then the power of love will be fully satisfied, all the gaps will be filled, and their joys and sorrows will join their hands in a harmony of fulfillment which is blessedness. (p. 75)

The Finite and the Infinite: God's Love in Human Love Relations

According to Tagore, the finite ideals will have to be transmuted into the infinite before the soul can get perfect satisfaction through them. In human experience, there is nothing that equals the joy of love. For Tagore, God is love.

The love of the mother for the child or the love of lover for the beloved is only an instance of the supreme love, which is God. And this love expresses itself not only in the ecstatic devotion of the mystic but also in the routine of everyday life of the common man. Tagore declares that God is to be realized in the common realities of life and in the daily work which sustains the world.

Everything is not God

Tagore says that, though God is everything, everything is not God. The whole universe is regarded by Tagore as the expression of God but different things express God in different degrees. Tagore makes the soul of man, the highest manifestation of divinity. In the heart of mankind, God shapes his will and therefore God needs man's love as much as man needs God's love. God reveals his beauty in all his creation so that man may be forever in love with it and thereby with him. In song No: 56, Tagore asks:

O thou lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not? (G. LVI)

How Do We Get Real Liberation?

According to Tagore, the real liberation or freedom does not lie in renouncing the world and its activities. Liberation or freedom results from the discharge of one's duties. One must do one's duty in life and therein lies real spiritual bliss and freedom. In *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, Radhakrishnan asks:

How can he whose joy is in Brahma live in inaction? (p. 81)

A man who is detached from the worldly things, but who is at the same time active, is more courageous than the man who merely renounces the world. A man in his detachment is neither saddened by failures nor frightened by fears. He can exercise courage in the face of isolation, his love of the world in the face of cruelty and his humour in the face of man's limitations.

In *The Philosophy of Rabindranth Tagore*, S. Radhakrishnan says:

The liberated soul of the true saint does not wish to escape from this world, but tries to improve it. But all his work will be rooted in an inner peace and repose. It is true that it is bliss or delight. (p. 80)

Realize Liberation Through Bondage!

Tagore says that freedom means freedom from bondage, but it can be realized only through bondage. God himself is bound to the universe of his own creation. If he were absolutely free, there will be no creation at all. He says:

Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us for ever. (G XI)

Illusion and Truth

According to Tagore, the world may be illusion or *maya*, but it is also essential, as without illusion truth itself will be empty. He says that truth derives its significance from the existence of illusion or *maya*. It is through the illusory world that the Supreme expresses itself, and it is by reaching forward to the absolute that illusion justifies its existence.

Place of Death, Evil and Imperfection in the Rhythm of Life

Tagore says that, in the rhythm of life, death has its place, so also evil; imperfection and ugliness have their own necessity and significance. Creation is a ceaseless process, which is constantly perfecting itself. Imperfection is only incompleteness, a part of the rhythm of life. He says that life's tragedies are only a part of the rhythm of life through which the joy of life asserts itself. If life is viewed as a whole, it will be seen that, "unbroken perfection is over all".

According to Tagore's philosophy, God has created this beautiful world for the enjoyment of man and our duty is to enjoy the manifold pleasures with which God has blessed us in such plenty. He says:

No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight, (G LXXIII)

But it does not mean that Tagore is advocating a sensual life. His philosophy says that:

The things of nature and the events of the world will cause trouble and vexation of spirit, if, instead of utilizing them for spiritual and unselfish ends, we make use of them for

our own sensation and enjoyment. (PRT, 72)

Work and Joy

Tagore says that the souls that are god-possessed are people who do work for the mere joy of work and live for the mere joy of life. *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* says:

He is knowledge, power and action according to the Upanishads; but his action is expression of his joy. (p. 81)

According to him, a true religious person does even the dullest deeds with a singing soul. He says that our work in the temporal world should not absorb all our energies and make us miss the universal vision. With a strong hold on the idea of the all-pervading, we must work in the world.

Oh, grant me my prayer that I may never loss the bliss of the touch of the one in the play of the many. (G. LXIII)

Life in this World is a Great Invitation to a Great Festival

In song number 16 Tagore describes his life in this world as an invitation to a great festival from God.

I have had my invitation to this world's festival, my life has been blessed. My eyes have seen and my ears have heard. (G. XIV)

According to Tagore, this world is the great festival of God, in which the gifts of God are spread out in their immense variety and abundance. There are manifold beauties of the external universe, which are the great blessing of God.

Tagore is thankful to God for the gift of life in this world, where he can enjoy the various beautiful scenes and sights spread out in such abundance for his benefit. Tagore feels grateful to God for giving him an opportunity to taste the happiness of this earth.

Devotional Poetry

The central theme of *Gitanjali* is devotional. It expresses the yearning of the devotee for re-union with the divine. It is in the tradition of the devotional poetry, but it finds a new and original treatment.

When **Gitanjali** was first published in English, the western countries hailed it for its message of peace and love in a war torn and embittered world. *Gitanjali* soothes, consoles and strengthens the soul. Some regarded it as the most beneficial and elevating reading ever possible in this world. The translation of *Gitanjali* is hailed as a great contribution to English language and literature from the East.

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