

Tagore's *Gitanjali*: A Critical Appraisal

Aju Mukhopadhyay

Abstract

The original book of poems in Bangla or Bengali titled *Gitanjali* or offering of songs was quite different from the *Gitanjali* (1912) in English comprising of 130 poems culled from ten books; all translated from the original Bangla to English by the poet himself which together with *The Gardener* (1913) won the Nobel Prize in 1913. *Gitanjali* was highly acclaimed throughout the world. William Rothenstein, who introduced the manuscript to the first gathering wrote, "Here was poetry of a new order which seemed to me on a level with that of the great mystics. Andrew Bradley, to whom I showed them agreed: 'It looks as though we have at last a great poet among us again.' "

Songs Unheard of

The songs of *Gitanjali* were something unique in their approach; direct and pure, unheard of before with such lyrical richness though Rabindranath Tagore wrote *Gitanjali*, an offering of devotional songs in Bengali, which were somewhat in tune with the religious and devotional culture of the then Bengal. The richness of his songs took him beyond the traditions. Their translations in English vibrated with such romantic appeal to the English speaking world that at once it saw a link between Tagore and the *Bible*. They were overwhelmed to such an extent that they proposed a Nobel Prize for the creator. With the Nobel Prize the poet, first among the Asians to win it in literature, became suddenly so popular that he was enthused to reach the larger audience, almost under compulsion, and translation was almost the only way to reach them even in India, beyond Bengal. He became a great bilingual writer in the world. His creations spread beyond poetry and literature. *Gitanjali* made him quite unexpectedly an internationalist per se and a prophet.

The Nobel Prize

The editor of *The English Writings of Tagore* wrote in the introduction of volume-1, "The Nobel Prize in literature was awarded to him in 1913 for 'Gitanjali' (1912) and 'The Gardener' (1913). The citation of the award praised his 'Profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West.' Whether he indeed made his poetic thought a part of the literature of the West is a different proposition. But with his English translation his transition from a Bengali writer to a world figure became complete." ¹

They made his works part of the West because they found in him echoes of Biblical anthem as the source, though his main sources were the Vedas and the Upanishads as they were words of Gods heard by the Rishis. Many times the

saints realise the same things and sometimes express them in the same way. God in essence is the same whether Biblical or Vedic. Tagore had knowledge of both.

The Story of his Becoming

Away from the superstitious ritualistic way of Hindu religion, Maharshi Debendranath, father of Rabindranath, adopted the simple and straight way of connecting with the divine through the Upanishadic path, calling it Brahmoism, based on faith of one divine reality which pervades the earth and water and the nether world, without naming the different Gods. The first founder of Brahma Samaj was Raja Rammohan Roy though Debendranath executed the work to become its real founder. They never shunned Hinduism. Among other songs, Tagore composed songs and poems on Vaishnav theme and on Goddess Kali too. He loved the Bauls, Sufis and Fakirs, the free seekers of truth on straight path, with love extended to humans as well as to the divine. Following his father, he entered into a communion with the Lord of his life, 'Jivan Devata'. The study of Vedas and Upanishads prepared him on the way.

"Then came my initiation ceremony of Brahminhood when the Gayatri verse of meditation was given to me, whose meaning, according to the explanation I had, runs as follows:

Let me contemplate the adorable splendour of Him who created the earth, the air and the starry spheres, and sends the power of comprehension within our minds.

"This produced a sense of serene exaltation in me, the daily meditation upon the infinite being which unites in one stream of creation my mind and the outer world."²

This was followed by several experiences connecting the poet to the inner world.

"The artist is subdued by the man of God and there is no room in these poems for high flights of imagination or dexterity of thought or emotional exuberance or metrical playfulness. The naked spirit is awed and humble in the presence of God and speaks in tones of utter simplicity",³ opined Krishna Kripalani about the book of poems titled, *Naivedya*. Several poems from this collection were included in the English *Gitanjali*.

Most of his beloved ones in the family died between 1883 and 1907. Grief and loneliness made him humbly surrender at the divine feet, recording them in tones serene and placid. Circumstances led him to feel God intensely giving him maturity to write poems which later became parts of *Gitanjali*. A poet is born and the time circumstances make him matured and ripe. Tagore, a born-poet, became experienced by all surrounding influences in life to sing paeans to God, to become the poet of *Gitanjali*.

Tagore took a leading part in protesting against the partition of Bengal in 1905 but came out of it as it turned violent and was severely criticised by his countrymen. He opposed the British from time to time for their tyrannical rule

in India and refused the Knighthood as a protest against the massacre at Jallianwalla Bagh.

Krishna Kripalani observed, "All the pain and suffering, the bereavements and rebuffs, the struggles and mortifications, both in the world outside and in his mind, which Rabindranath who had begun his career as a carefree singer, went through in the first decade of this century were finally resolved and sublimated in the songs that poured forth from his full and chastened heart in 1909 and 1910 and published as *Gitanjali* in the latter year." ⁴

Gitanjali is offering of handful of songs to God and the next, *Gitimalya*, is a garland of songs offered to Him.

The *Gitanjali*

Gitanjali was highly acclaimed throughout the world. William Rothenstein, who introduced the manuscript to the first gathering wrote, "Here was poetry of a new order which seemed to me on a level with that of the great mystics. Andrew Bradley, to whom I showed them agreed: 'It looks as though we have at last a great poet among us again.' "

Yeats and Ezra Pound loved them at first sight like many others. Per Hallstrom, the member-secretary of the Nobel committee opined, "It is certain, however, that no poet in English since the death of Goethe in 1832 can rival Tagore in noble humanity." ⁵

Entering into the heart of *Gitanjali* we find:

Thus it is that thy joy in me is so full. Thus it is that
thou hast come down to me. O thou lord of all heavens,
where would be thy love if I were not?

Gitanjali-56

It is a very mellow, heart-touching song we have heard innumerable times. In his famous, "Religion of Man" the poet concludes chapter-13, 'Spiritual Freedom', with a song of the Baul sect of Bengal, which echoes the above poem-

It goes on blossoming for ages, the soul-lotus, in which I am bound,
as well as thou, without escape. There is no end to the opening of its petals,
and the honey in it has so much sweetness that thou, like
an enchanted bee, canst never desert it, and therefore thou art bound,
and I am, and 'mukti' is no where.⁶

The 'mukti' is an age old Indian idea, something like 'Nirvana' of the Buddhist parlance, meaning release of the soul for ever, to be merged with the divine essence, so that one does not come back to this mundane world again. But Tagore wrote,

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground
and where the path maker is breaking stones.

Gitanjali-11

So it is here that we have to see God and not to seek the beyond to merge with him. In 'Sanhita', a part of Vedas, it is said that God is 'Ushan', 'Ashmayu'; impatient and eager to come to me. In a song Tagore wrote that to meet him God has been coming for long. He realised,

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

Gitanjali-1

Inspite of everything he never wished to get himself exclusively merged in God,

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the
embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.
My world will light its hundred different lamps with
thy flame and place them before the alter of thy temple.
No. I shall never shut the doors of my senses.

Gitanjali-73

The Veda tells of light. Tagore too has been rapturous with light:

Light, my light, the world-filling light, the eye kissing light,
heart sweetening light!

Gitanjali-57

The four main deities of the Vedas: Agni, Indra, Surya and Soma have been worshipped by Tagore throughout his life, says Gouri Dharmapal, adding, "One way of knowing Rabindranath is Veda just as through Rabindranath we can know the Vedas. Vedas and Rabindranath are one and the same. One tells us in Vedic language, the other tells in Bangla; neither by reading, learning, translating nor by reciting but by realising."

Sometimes his beloved becomes the essence of God; God in human. Sometimes the poet addresses the God as the Mother-

Mother, I shall weave a chain of pearls for thy neck
with my tears of sorrow.

Gitanjali-83

Sometimes he calls him He -

He It is, the innermost one, who awakens my
Being with his deep hidden touches.

Gitanjali-72

Sometimes God is his friend, sometimes he is the Lord, king or father and sometimes it is neuter. Sometimes the poet waits for him in happiness, sometimes in uncertainty.

I have not seen his face, nor have I listened to his voice;
only I have heard his gentle footsteps from the road before
my house. . . .

Gitanjali-47

The time has not come true, the words have not been rightly
set; only there is the agony of wishing in my heart.
The blossom has not opened; only the wind is sighing by.

Gitanjali-13

When the waiting is long, he imagines his touch to be happy, but suddenly remembers that there was a time when he played with the God but could not discern him as such and now that the time is over, he finds that it is his playmate whom the world now worships.

When my play was with thee I never questioned who thou wert
I knew nor shyness nor fear, my life was boisterous.

Gitanjali-97

The poet was never ready to leave the world for the beyond but imagined many times the approaching last days of his life even when he was in his midlife which prompted him to write these poems,

WHEN I GO from hence let this be my parting word,
that what I have seen is unsurpassable
My whole body and my limbs have thrilled with his
touch who is beyond touch; and if the end comes
here, let it come- let this be my parting word.

Gitanjali-96

The book ends with an appropriate poem ending with-"Like a flock of homesick cranes flying night and day back to their mountain nests let all my life take its voyage to its eternal home in one salutation to thee." *Gitanjali-103*

His yearning for the eternity was not the spiritual goal but his apprehension of death, a physical conclusion of life, usually.

Due to the uniformity of thoughts and ideas, due to the selection and translation of his rhymed poems into prose poems, *Gitanjali* has acquired a unique feature among all his works.

Tagore the Bilingual Litterateur

This *Gitanjali* in English is quite different from the original *Gitanjali* in Bangla. The English *Gitanjali* has 103 songs or poems, culled from ten books and *The Gardener* has 85 poems taken from 13 books and some more sources.

Tagore translated the songs from his own Bangla in the above two books and became a great bilingual writer after the publication, with the success of *Gitanjali* in particular. He began translating large number of his works then. The editor of his 'English Writings' has opined that there is no such writer in Europe who translated so much of his own works in an alien language and that there is none in the history of literature who wrote so much in an alien language remaining at the same time a major litterateur in his own mother-tongue. Tagore is known to Benglis through his works in Bangla and the others know him mostly through his works in English including translations. Tagore was a major Indian English writer. I relish him through both the languages.

How Spiritual are his Songs

Living with Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry, Dilip Kumar Roy, in one of his correspondences with him in 1934, wrote that Tagore himself admitted that his spiritual poems were born out of imagination, that he had become an atheist, as per reports. Sri Aurobindo usually remained silent but some of his observations are worth mentioning here.

"Well, yes, he mentalises, aestheticises, sentimentalises the things of the spirit – but I can't say that I have ever found the expression of a concrete spiritual realisation in his poetry- though ideas, emotions, ideal dreams in plenty. That is something, but-

"Russel has his doubts because he has no spiritual experience. Rolland because he takes his emotional intellectuality for spirituality; as for Tagore- if one is blind, it is quite natural for the human intelligence which is rather an imbecile thing at its best- to deny light; if one's highest natural vision is that of glimmering mists, it is equally natural to believe that all high vision is only a mist or a glimmer. But light exists for all that- and for all that spiritual Truth is more than mist and glimmer." ⁸

Sri Aurobindo perhaps realised that all these were reports on the basis of talks, on the basis of their notion about the poet and that he did not read all of Tagore's poems so he reminded Dilip to keep these '*Obiter dicta*' up his sleeve. "So, let the seal be there. '*Obiter dicta*' of this kind are after all only side flashes - not a judgment balanced and entire." ⁹

He continued, "I don't think we should hastily conclude that Tagore is passing over to the opposite camp. He is sensitive and perhaps a little affected by the positive robustuous, slogan-fed practicality of the day- he has passed through Italy and Persia and was feted there. But I don't see how he can turn his back on all the ideas of a life-time. After all he has been a wayfarer towards the same goal as ours in his own way - that is the main thing, the exact stage of advance

and the putting of the steps are minor matters . . . Besides, he has had a long and brilliant day- I should like him to have as peaceful and undisturbed a sunset as may be. His exact position as a poet or a prophet or anything else will be assigned by posterity and we need not be in a haste to anticipate the final verdict."¹⁰

Once when Sri Aurobindo was prosecuted by the British Government for his journalistic work, considered objectionable to them in 1907, Tagore wrote a poem and read it before Sri Aurobindo, titled, "Namaskar". Among other things, the poet wrote-

The fiery messenger that with the lamp of God
Hath come- where is the king who can with chain or rod
Chastise him?

(Translation by Kshitish Chandra Sen)¹¹

The poet visited Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry in May 1928. Remaining with him for few hours he came back to his ship to resume his journey to Colombo. He was so impressed by his presence that he remained silent for the whole day. He wrote an article writing among other things, "At the very first sight I could realize that he had been seeking for the soul and had gained it, and through this long process of realization had accumulated within him a silent power of inspiration. His face was radiant with inner light and

"I felt that the utterance of the ancient Hindu Rishi spoke from him of that equanimity which gives the human soul its freedom and entrance into the All."¹²

Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Tagore's main biographer, mentioned that he wrote letters from the ship to Pratima Devi, his daughter-in-law and Mira Devi, his daughter, separately. In them he wrote that he had realised after meeting Aurobindo that he needed to do that type of *tapasya* or askesis to know his Self, to know himself. He further wrote that diurnal works and talks make the mind suppressed under the burden of the mundane. If such a sadhana is not done, the inner light would be dimmed in due course.

Krishna Kripalani wrote, "His religious poetry . . . thus began as an intimate t'ete-a-t'ete with his deity whose image invisible though it was and remained, went on changing and assuming different aspects until, one might say, it almost ceased to be independent of what he saw and heard and felt. His God became everything, and everything, however, seemingly ugly or terrible, was lit up with divinity."¹³

The Thrust of Life

Though Tagore was brought up with the study of the Vedas and Upanishads, had some intuitive feelings and experiences all through his life, he could not engage himself entirely on the yoga-path for which he had longed all along as we have seen in his aspirations expressed after meeting Sri Aurobindo in 1928. This was one of the main causes of his sympathy for him. But bigger was the call of life to

him, he admitted at times, through his poetry. He could not remain aloof from men and society, from the dark shades of clouds and the bright rays of the Sun. Throughout his life he suffered many set backs, many deaths of his near and dear ones. The poet with his faith on God and larger life energy survived all shocks. What Sri Aurobindo maintained even after his death, "He was a wayfarer towards the same goal as ours in his own way", was surely true. He was on the way to divinity though he could not plunge headlong into it during his lifetime. He surely had some psychic touch and golden experience, as are evident from his poems in *Gitanjali*, however much they may be the product of his imagination and poetic flight. Mentally he must have touched his God though he could never go deeper into it as he himself did not wish; vital life playing a greater role in his life. The whole thing made him as a vessel ready to the point he realised.

"Deliverance is not for me in renunciation," he said, adding "I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight." And he promised, "I shall never shut the doors of my senses." (*Gitanjali*-73)

In spite of all his cravings and thirst for the divine Tagore loved Life more than God. He enjoyed it. But it was *Gitanjali*, his offering of songs to God, which made him known to the world as it became a link between him and his God, his readers and followers.

Though *Gitanjali* seems to be full of hymns, songs of love and surrender to God, it contains his concern for the Motherland, for his fellow countrymen, for the society in general. In a poem in it he prayed to his father, to raise the people of his country to a perfect humane level with all qualities of a perfect man, so that out of all turmoil, depravities and narrowness his country might be ready for a struggle towards perfection; ready to stand on its own feet as a country, marching towards the heaven of freedom. The urge and appeal in it to God, the earnest aspiration of the poet, was to see India Free with its people perfectly humane so it could stand among the nations holding its head high. The patriot poet wished strongly the freedom of his country but did not compose a song of revolt. The poem has been uttered innumerable as prayer, recited in public gatherings, imitated and referred to in learned papers. To end this work on *Gitanjali* I wish to raise this aspect of Tagore's concern for his country, a perfect patriot as he was, by repeating this poem which may be no less relevant today in Indian situation than before, though we are officially free. To the poet, freedom lay not in physical acquirement of the country but in becoming free in spirit and status.

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening
thought and action-
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

Gitanjali-35

Notes

- ¹Tagore. Reprint- 2004. V-1. p.10
- ²Tagore. 'Religion of Man'. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi : Sahitya Akademi.V-3. Reprint-2002. p.121.
- ³Krishna Kripalani. *Tagore A Life*. New Delhi : National Book Trust, 1986. p.102.
- ⁴Kripalani. p.120.
- ⁵As quoted in Kripalani. pp.124-132.
- ⁶Tagore. V-3. p.165.
- ⁷Gouri Dharmapal. *Ved O Rabindranath*. Vira Nagar, Nadia: Ushagram Trust. 2007. p. 38.
- ⁸Sri Aurobindo to Dilip. Pune; Harikrishna Mandir and Mysore; Mira Aditi. 2005. Vol.2. pp.41-43.
- ⁹Sri Aurobindo to Dilip. p.44.
- ¹⁰Sri Aurobindo to Dilip. p.44.
- ¹¹As referred in K.R.S.Iyengar. *Sri Aurobindo a Biography and a History*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1985. p.230.
- ¹²Iyengar. p.16.
- ¹³Kripalani. p.218.

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