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Understanding Spiritual Humanism – A Study of Rabindranath Tagore's Thought

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Abstract:

'The most perfect inward expression has been attained by man in his own body. But what is most important of all is the fact that man has also attained its realization in a more subtle body outside his physical system. His multicellular body is born, and it dies; his multi-personal Humanity is immortal' -(Tagore .*Rabindranath. The Religion of Man.* Rabindranath Tagore Omnibus II. *Rupa Publications India Pvt Ltd 2003 pg 9*). The present paper studies Humanism as a Philosophical idea with particular reference to Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's thought, which he developed through his many literary pieces. The paper also undertakes a brief study of the concept of Humanism as it emerged and developed in the Western world with a broad comparison with Tagore's thinking to highlight the novelty of his theory of Humanism. Humanism as a social thought is relevant in the current social scenario; with divergent social systems and order, only an appeal to Man's inner spiritual self can overcome any conflicting forces in society. A new understanding of Humanism is very relevant and conducive to the holistic growth of Mankind. In Rabindranath Tagore's writings and Philosophical thinking, a new idea of Humanism developed in the form of Spiritual Humanism; the paper is an extensive study of the thought through a study of his writings in this context. The paper also aims to highlight unique features of his thought which distinguish him from other social thinkers who conceptualize this thought of Humanism. The final section discusses the relevance of Humanism in the current social scenario and how it is the need of the hour to understand the concept in this light. The paper primarily focuses on his books '*Shadna*,' '*Creative Unity*' and '*Religion of Man*.'

KEYWORDS: *Humanism, Spiritual Unity, Upanishads, Divine Lover, Renaissance, Neo Vedantic*

Introduction: Humanism is an intellectual and cultural movement linked to the revival of classical learning in the Renaissance; the Philosophy adopted an ideal of complete development of the individual, which rejected religious asceticism, narrow scholasticism, and humble piousness

The idea of a rich flourishing of individual potentiality by self-cultivation and self-improvement became the center of this thought.

The Renaissance movement started in Northern Italy in the 13th and 14th Centuries and later spread through Europe and England. The father of Humanism is Petrarch, who, through his writings and Poems, adopted an idea of the full development of individual beings by rejecting religions, Ascetism, and narrow scholasticism. His work established secular poetry as a serious and noble pursuit.

Since the 19th century, mainly in the English-speaking world, the then Humanism as a Philosophical doctrine has come to designate a non-religious or anti-religion worldview usually based on a belief in Man's capacity of self-cultivation and self-empowerment in the progress of Humanity. The central focus of Humanism was the idea of 'Humanitas,' which means the development of human virtue in all its terms to its fullest extent. The term thus implied not only such qualities as are associated with modern moral Humanity – understanding, benevolence, compassion, and mercy, but also with characteristics such as fortitude, judgment, prudence, and eloquence act. It calls for a delicate balance of action and contemplation, a balance born not of compromise but of complementarity. It had an evangelical dimension.

It sought to project 'humanitas' from the individual into the "state" at large and was visible in literary work of that period.

What subsequently developed was the idea of individual and human dignity. A sense of personal autonomy. A thought that intelligence is capable of meticulous scrutiny and self-inquiry. (*Nauert, Charles Garfield. Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe (New Approaches to European History). Cambridge University Press, 2006*)

The influence of this thought process was visible in the political thought process, literacy writing, and visual art forms in Europe through the Renaissance movement.

The modern Indian political idealist thinkers, also called Neo-Vedantic thinkers though they bear close affinity with its close counterpoint in the West, successfully maintained their identity. They agree with Western thinkers on the path of 'Humanitas' for realizing social goals; they also emphasize spirituality. The modern Indian thinkers have sought in the Vedanta a liberal social philosophy that assures Man's freedom from the evils of modern civilization, such as imperialism and totalitarianism. They interpreted Vedanta Philosophy intending to seek its relevance in the contemporary secular spheres of life. They have inferred new meanings of the old theological concepts. The doctrine of the identity of the human soul with God or Brahman has been pressed in the service of Nationalism, Humanism, cosmopolitanism, democracy, and Liberty. Their idea of spirituality is significant for Man's life and stresses the ethical way of life. It comprehends all human endeavors that distinguish Man from matter and other salient beings. Thus, the demands for freedom of consciousness, feeling of human brotherhood, and passion for social justice manifest the eternal spirit abiding in man. According to this view, man's devotion to truth and urge to acquire the knowledge of ultimate reality result in the presence of spirit in Man. In this sense, rationality and intellectual honesty can find a place in the Religion of the spirit. Similarly, all aesthetic pursuits that raise Man above physical existence enable him to transcend the bound Of his finite self.

This was the social canvas on which Rabindranath Tagore founded his philosophy of Humanism. Renaissance Humanism greatly influenced Rabindranath Tagore. As Upanishadic thought, Buddhism and Jainism played a pivotal role in developing his thought. Though Tagore gave equal importance to man's economic, Political, and social welfare, he looked at these problems spiritually. Any attempt made for the welfare of Mankind is to him adequate where it reveals the spiritual and ethical nature of man. Thus man is accorded the highest place in the world because he has spirit in him.

In his characteristic poetic manner in his book "Religion of Man," Tagore says, "Each age reveals its great expression that carries it across singing centuries to the continental plateau of Permanent human history. These expressions may not be considerably religious, but indirectly they belong to Man's Religion, for they are the outcome of consciousness which finds its manifestation in Science, Philosophy, and art, in the social ethics in all that carry their ultimate value in themselves these are timely Spiritual and they should all the consciously co-ordinated in one great Religion of man".(Tagore. Rabindranath. *The Religion of Man. Tagore Omnibus vol II. Rupa Publications Pvt Ltd 2006 pg 11*)

So unlike Western humanist thinkers, Tagore did not rip off spirituality from Man. The literary writings of Rabindranath Tagore made the concept of Humanism flow into the heart of people through numerous aesthetic forms. Radha Krishnan (Radhakrishnan S – *Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore. MacMillian And co, Limited 1919 pg 22*) "We do not know whether it is Rabindranath's own heart or the heart of India that is beating here. He further said, "In his philosophy, the ancient wisdom of India was restated to meet the needs of the present time. Tagore has brought out the traditional philosophical note of India from the dark abbeys of the present philosophical belief". Radha Krishnan further describes Tagore's philosophy:" He gives in a human God, dismisses with contempt the concept of world illusions, praises action overmuch and promises fullness of life to the human soul."

In the writings of Tagore, we find an incredible amalgamation of Renaissance humanism and the Humanism of Upanishads. What we see are three distinct characteristics (i) He attributes humanness to the whole world and even to God (ii) Along with that, he attributed divinity to Man (iii) Finally, Man as a finite worldly being is given importance in his philosophy and all his thinking and work this Love for Humanity is expressed.

CONCEPT OF HUMAN GOD

Tagore did not believe in any supernatural being. The idea of God has no meaning except the idea of the complete development of Humanity. A God is revealed in the best way in man. Man himself becomes God, the object of worship for Tagore. In 'Religion of Man,' Tagore argued against Atheists. Here, he says that atheists may not believe any ultimate principal as the creator and sustainer of this world; they will have to agree that man's success cannot lie in satisfying worldly hunger. Man finds the meaning of his life in his constant endeavor to be a complete man. This may appear to be a subjective concept of a complete being, but for Tagore, one's image of the perfect man is his concept of God. Thus Tagore is more concerned with the notion of the personal God. Like the mystics, he imagines a close love relationship with the Divine Lover. The idea that we come across in his many poems and songs. (He calls the idea of God in this private personal life Jibon Debota. Tagore has imagined a deity of his life who is his primary source of inspiration. He dwells in his heart and guides his life, every activity, and every achievement) Thus, this conception of a near-loving God who plays Lila of Love is an anthropomorphic conception of God. Like Humans, God also wants Love in return for his Love. The divine becomes human in this way. Thus in this phrase of Humanism, all finite beings become an expression of the joy of the creator, who himself is manifested in this Universe. Here we can find a distinct influence of Vaishnava Philosophy. Being a Humanist, he truly believes in the greatness of finite. Finite as finite is excellent; if the ultimate aim of a Human being is to be merging with the absolute, then it means it ceases to be human, which is not desirable for him as a human being. (Tagore, R.N. *Devata from Bethika. Rabindra Rachonaboli vol3*)

Thus the above discussion shows how God merges with his conception of Man.

MAN AS DIVINE

Creation is the manifestation of the eternal beauty of God. The conception of man in Tagore's Philosophy is total. He has given a concept of Moral, spiritual, and social man. In the second aspect of his Humanism, he attributes divinity to Man. Man is divine in the sense that God is revealed in him. In man's activity in his power of infinite Love and creation of beauty, we find Divine in him is getting expressed. In one of his collections of poetries called *Bethikā*, he says that when a man faces the evil force of his courage and sacrifices, we feel as if God has come out from death in the immortal light of Him. Then heavens come down to earth and make it imperishable. (Tagore, R.N - '*Devata*' from *Beethika*. Rabindra Rachanaboli vol 3). Tagore says that the gods in paradise envy human beings because God depends upon man to find completeness in his Love. Therefore, for Tagore, ' Humanity is necessary for perfecting the Divine truth.' (R.N.Tagore. *Creative Unity*. p 80) Tagore further writes that when a man gets the pure vision of truth, he realizes the divinity of man, and to him, his dear and lovable becomes the object of worship.

Thus, for Tagore, Humanity is necessary for perfecting the Divine truth. In many of his poems, he has expressed that God does not live in heaven or any temple but lives in all men's hearts. Therefore, human Love promoting the welfare of Humanity is the best expression of one's gratitude towards God. The service of man is the service of God. The Humanism of Tagore is a part of his feeling of Unity with the whole world. It is a feeling of Universal love.

Any attempt made for humankind's welfare is adequate to him because it helps reveal Man's spiritual and ethical nature. Man is accorded the highest place in the world because he has spirit in him. Man is the replica of the divine spirit, and it is here that Man's ultimate consciousness is revealed. In his philosophy, Spiritualism and Humanism complement each other. His Spiritualism does not make him reluctant to the world and Man but brings him nearest to Man. Belief in spirituality is translated into a love for Humanity. Man does not have to pass to any supernatural world to realize the spirit in himself, but he realizes his spiritual nature in worldly existence. Spiritual discipline for Tagore aims to enter into the hearts of all men. Tagore believes in harmony between Man, nature, and the universal spirit. Therefore he, in his writing (*Shantiniketan*), writes. "From grass to Man, wherever in the world my mind becomes indifferent, there my spirituality is limited. When our consciousness and spirit get diffused in the world, we feel all consciousness with our consciousness" (Tagore, R.N., and *Shantiniketan*. V.B. 1963 (vol 1 pg 89). To whatever extent he has fixed his life on spiritual truth, his Love for Humanity also has grown deeper and deeper to that extent.

Tagore is also called a rational humanist. His belief in Man's spirituality does not make him a nonbeliever in Man's rational power. He emphasizes reason and is against any prejudice and preconceived notions, be it religious sectorial thoughts or the ideology of narrow Nationalism. He attributes a deeper spiritual content to the Humanism of the Western world, and by writing spiritual sensibility with national thought, he makes it more universal in its appeal. Here his thought resembles the humanistic thinkers Pretrach, and Erusnon, the early Western humanist thinkers. However, unlike them, Man is powerful because of the presence of God in him. Thus his thought on Humanism can be rephrased as spiritual Humanism.

The above thought was further developed in his writing '*Vaisnava Kabita*.' When Tagore says, 'I bow to human God,' he does not support avatar vada but respects Man's divinity. It is to see the infinite in finite, in Man. One essential aspect of Tagore's Poetic compositions is the thought that Love for Humanity merges with Love for Divinity. Human Love is a non-worldly thing. Man wants to get the taste of the Love of God by loving his beloved, which removes the distance between earth and heaven. The Humanism of Tagore is a part of his feeling of Unity with the whole world. (Chakraborty A. A *Tagore Reader*. Mac.& Co. London 1924)

HUMANISM AS A SPIRITUAL GOAL

The third aspect of Tagore's Humanism is his thought of service to Humanity in this worldly existence. This can be contrasted with the view of the Salvation of the individual soul in a future existence and the glorification of a supernatural supreme being. (Upanishadic view) .He urges men to accept freely and joyously the great gift of life and realize that life is in its own right and can be beautiful for its own sake.

So Tagore did not teach the philosophy of negation or barren renunciation but a comprehensive realization. Tagore has placed faith in the Kingdom of Man on earth, rich with various human relationships. For him, Man is great because he has infinite possibilities within. The aim of finite Man is not to become God but to develop in himself high faculties of the mind and realize the perfect ideal of Humanity. The poet emphasizes the individual's relation to society, his unending debt to Humanity's collective culture, and his corresponding obligation to serve the common good. In social life, wherever the state church or other powers try to repress Humanity, the poet protests and shows in his thinking and working the path of welfare and prosperity of individual beings with Humanity. So throughout his social philosophy, he glorifies the "eternal man."

Thus Tagore's notion of Humanism greatly influences his Social Philosophy. This has two aspects; one is the aspect of knowledge or analysis, other one is solving the problems or practical sides. His social poems, Novels dramas discuss issues like social inequalities and injustice. Issues of injustice against women had been a central focus of many of his novels. In the novel '*Home and the World* ', he discusses the narrow connotation of Nationalism and projects a theory where he criticizes an understanding of Patriotism that is devoid of any consideration of Humanity.

The conception of man in Tagore's Philosophy is total. He has given a concept of moral, spiritual, and social man. He believes in the dignity of man above everything, which combines in himself Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. Man is an individual as well as a social being. Keeping individual differences, man should merge into the Universal society of man. There is the 'eternal individual' in man, which protects against inequalities and injustice in society.

As a strong Humanist, Tagore advocates the ideal of Unity and harmony and not uniformity and identity. In the secularization of life, immense potential spiritual wealth resources are lost. Tagore further states that every person has individuality and Universality, and he is only complete if he finds his meaning as a part of the rest of humankind. At this level, there is no distinction among people. Any force of difference cannot destroy the underlying Unity of all men. Despite all differences in education, economics, and politics, man experiences Unity with all men. The Unity of all men is grounded, based on the presence of Universality in him. Thus, according to Tagore, man and society have an intimate relationship. Man's social aspect elevates him from animal instinct and makes him civilized. In his book 'Creative Unity,' Tagore further developed his analysis of the matter-mind relationship. He writes that Materials as materials are Savage; they are Solitary and like individual impulses seeking unlimited freedom of willfulness. Left to themselves, they are destructive. However, an ideal of Unity directly raises its banner in its center; it brings these rebellious forces under its sway, and creation is revealed- the creation, which is peace, which is the perfect relationship. Man's selfish motives and interests are controlled and submerged by the social aspects of his nature. (Tagore. R.N. *Creative Unity*. Mac & Co 1971.pg 80)

Man's aim is cosmic Salvation, where one's self merges with the social self. Furthermore, without this, man cannot attain perfection and limitation of suffering. One must rise above ego and feel like a part of society. Though a man remains mortal through his multi-personal relationships, the consciousness of this Unity is Spiritual and is the Religion of man.

Tagore, the social reformer: The most significant challenge faced by the 19th and 20th centuries social reformers in India was the religious future of the country. The religious situation had to be dealt with in a manner that would guarantee the spiritual progress of the country. Tagore dreams of and pictures us a vision of India. His Philosophy is an absolute idealism where the supreme spirit is not an abstract entity residing safely from the world. The concrete, vibrant life is at the center of things. Tagore had a wholeness of vision that did not tolerate any division between matter and energy, individual and society.

Tagore propagated a spiritual religion with a love of God and service of man in its principle. He was against idle rites and ceremonies, blind dogmas, and superstitions.

Accordingly, among the evils which were poisoning the very springs of national life is the caste system in India. The institution of caste may have served a purpose long ago, but today it is a positive hindrance to the spiritual faith within and progress outside. It failed to recognize the flow of life, the mobility of the mind, and the mutability of characteristics. Independent thinking and individuality are suppressed. The rigid and exclusive caste has destroyed social harmony and insulted the ETERNAL MAN in us. He truly believes in Humanity's oneness and wants to improve human relationships by rejecting the caste system. Thus Tagore looks at the problem of untouchability from the point of view of Humanism. He believes that God dwells in the heart of all men and, therefore, no person is impure or untouchable. Untouchability is a sin from the viewpoint of humanism. He dealt with this problem in many of his writings. His play *Chandalika* extensively deals with this problem. In some poems of *Punascha*, he deals with the same problems, where he shows that God does not shower his blessings on the man who hates his fellowmen, considers them impure, and tries to find God in the temples.

Thus Tagore suggests that we need to break open the gates and pull down the walls of our closed house for the air and light of God to pour in and enlighten us. He does not view social problems from a narrow economic or practical point of view. He brings his spiritual vision to bear on social issues and lifts them to a higher idealistic plane. Social unrest can end if people adopt the right attitude to life and develop reverence for the Divine in Man.

A comparison with M.N. Roy's Philosophy of Humanism:

Comparing Rabindranath Tagore's Philosophy with M.N. Roy's thought would be relevant here. They both had placed man at the center. They opposed those forces that affected man's freedom or that aspect of civilization which makes a man a machine that minimizes human freedom. Unlike Tagore, M.N.Roy was a materialist and had no faith in Spiritualism and mysticism. His approach was rational, which he derived from man's biological evolution. He calls it integral Humanism. Three attributes of human nature are rationality, morality, and freedom which are causally connected as a part of a new Humanism.

Conclusion: In Tagore's thought, it is not easy to distinguish Religion from philosophy. They have the same end to realize. Philosophy is the "vision of the real," Religion aims to learn Man's Unity with the divine. Both mean the same thing; that is why Tagore calls his Religion, 'the religion of man.' Tagore, a great humanist, associates Humanity with God and speaks of the divine nature of man. For him, it is not by merely attributing Humanity that we realize God had always remembered the demands of man's earthly existence when discussing his spirituality and divinity. It can very well be described as universal Religion, which also throws its gates open to everyone.

So for him, the earth is not where a man only lives briefly. However, it is here that he achieves the Kingdom of God through his creativity, and man becomes perfect in this worldly existence. For him, the meaning and nobility of human existence consist in serving society selflessly. Thus his Philosophy was man-centric.

This view of Humanism closely connects with the present-day social upheavals. His approach can vary significantly in our understanding of social equality.

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