

## THE IDEA OF GOD AND UNIVERSE IN TAGORE AND IQBAL

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Two great poets of the East that earned international reputation in modern times are undoubtedly Iqbal and Rabindranath Tagore. Both of them are brilliant luminaries on the literary firmament of Indo-Pak Sub-continent, having to their credit outstanding contributions in the field of poetry and thought. It is, however, not possible to give a complete picture of these two master-minds in all their colours within the frame-work of a single article. Different approaches from different view-points will be necessary for such a comprehensive study. In the present article, I shall confine myself to looking into their conception of life *vis-a-vis* God and Universe that has been revealed in and through their poetry.

I shall begin with Rabindranath.

What was Rabindranath's view of life and the world? What message did he give to mankind about the origin and ultimate destiny of man? I am sorry to observe that Rabindranath failed to give us any new message. His poetry and thought have been inspired by the teachings of the *Vedanta* or the *Upanishad* of which he was a votary. A correct appraisal of Rabindranath's conception of life will necessitate a brief survey of the religious beliefs and philosophical obsessions that had been dominating the world from the earliest times right down to the end of the nineteenth century.

### *Historical Background of Philosophical Thought*

Greece was the cradle of philosophy and of other branches of knowledge. It was Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who gave the world rudimentary ideas about human life and other problems connected with it. According to Plato, this phenomenal world is not real; it appears to be real, but it is not really real. To him, only the Forms or Ideas are real and permanent. This is what is called Idealism in philosophic parlance. According to this doctrine, all cognition through the senses and experience is nothing but mere illusion, and only in the idea of pure understanding and reason is the truth. Accordingly, this external world is nothing but a shadow, as it will ultimately disappear and be absorbed into that Absolute Idea

from which it emanated. The inevitable corollary to this proposition is that man also has no permanent value, as he, too, will lose his identity into that Ultimate Reality, like a drop into the ocean. Thus, the Idealistic philosophy of Plato and his followers did not recognise the reality or immortality of the Soul. This gave rise to a sense of frustration, ascetic inaction and other-worldliness in the mind of man. He tried to escape—not from death—but from life, for his emancipation. Iqbal himself has criticised Plato as follows:

The thought of Plato regarded loss as profit

His philosophy declared that being is non-being.

In India, too, the same gloomy picture of life was presented to the people by the Indian sages. Buddha preached the doctrine of “*Nirvan*” which was essentially identical with the Idealism of Plato. Complete evaporation of life into nothingness was the goal of Buddha. As Buddhism did not recognise God and believed in the law of *karma* and transmigration of the soul, a true Buddhist was to live a life of asceticism, carefully avoiding all actions and battles of life, so that he might not have to come back to this world again and again in consequence of his actions. It was rather his look-out to see that his body might speedily be liquidated. Life was practically death to him.

The Hindu philosophy was no better off. Among the six systems of Indian philosophy, viz. *Sankhya*, *Patanjal*, *Nyaya*, *Kapila*, *Vaisesika* and *Upanishad*, the first five were based on atheism; it was only the *Vedanta* or *Upanishad* that recognised the existence of God. But the philosophy of the *Upanishad* was more or less a counterpart of Plato’s Idealism. It also advocated the doctrine of Unity and the illusiveness of the world. In later times (in or around the 7th century A.D.), Sankaracharyya gave it a systematised shape and called it as *Adwaitabad* (Unity). But Sankar’s Unity was a bit different from Plato’s. Plato established the unity of Godhead by denying the external world; whereas Sankar established His unity by admitting that this external world has no separate entity at all; it is only for *Maya* that it looks like real, but actually it is part and parcel of God, or ‘*Brahma*’ as he calls Him. “*Ekamebadvitiyam*” (non-dualism) is the underlying significance of *Adwaitabad*. According to this view, Man is part and parcel of God, like all other things in the world. In other words, there is no distinction between the Creator and the Creation; God is all pervading and immanent in the world. Thus

we see that the Vedanta philosophy was pantheistic in its outlook. "Aham Brahmasmi" (I am Brahma), "Ayamatma Brahma" (this soul is Brahma), "Soham" (That is I)—these are the tenets of the *Upanishad*.

Unfortunately, the Islamic world was also caught into the vortex of this Pantheistic Idealism. Hazrat Muhammad (Peace be upon him) no doubt brought a new message and a new philosophy of life, viz: that the soul is immortal, that it will not be absorbed unto God, but will continue to exist as a separate entity even after death, that this world is also real and worth living in, and that man should boldly face the music of life to achieve his ultimate end. But within three centuries after his death, Muslim mind was perverted by Greek, Iranian and Indian philosophies and a new creed was developed in the Islamic fold under the name of Sufism. This Sufism was nothing but Idealistic Pantheism as it also believed that God is immanent and that man will ultimately be absorbed unto God (*fana' fillah*). Great stress was also laid upon the unreality and transitoriness of the world. Like Sankaracharya, Ibn al-'Arabi, a distinguished Muslim mystic of Spain (b. 1164 A.D.) propounded a theory of "*Wahadat-al-Wujud*" (Unityism) and one of the renowned sufis, Mansoor Hallaj, openly proclaimed "*An-al-Haq*" (I am the Truth). This is identical with the saying "*Aham Brahmasmi*", meaning "I am Brahma".

Very little change or innovation was effected in the western thought *vis-a-vis* its concept of Man, God and Universe. Kant, Hegel, and many others were groping in the dark and had no clarity of vision in this respect.

In the 19th century, the great German philosopher Neitzsche and the French philosopher Bergson presented some radical thoughts in respect of the prevalent view of life. Neitzsche's theories of "Superman" and "Eternal Recurrence" were no doubt thought-provoking, but these theories were capricious and so they could not get any foothold in the intellectual world. "New Gods, or resuscitated old Gods," he said, "can no longer be of any avail. Our only hope lies in new men". He advocated the masculinisation of the world, the rearing of a high type of man and the creation of a ruler caste. For this he demanded complete emancipation from Judaeo-Christian morality and total transvaluation of all values. "Will to power" was his motto and there was nothing wrong or immoral to him in the way of grabbing that power. He deprecated

common people as “herd”. To crown all, he was an atheist. For these reasons, his teachings fell through and he was branded as “a misanthropist, promoter of war, infidel and corruptor of morals”. Iqbal himself describes Nietzsche as a “madman who has entered the glass-maker’s shop and smashed every article of vanity. In doing so, his iconoclastic rod also fell on some sacred vessels, he may be excused.”

Bergson’s “Creative Evolution” was, no doubt, a distinct land-mark in the evolution of philosophical thought, but that had no direct bearing on the point under investigation. It did not say anything about the individuality or immortality of the Soul.

Thus, it can be safely said that the same gloomy prospect of life was dominating the world up to the nineteenth century.

#### Rabindranath Tagore

We now come to Rabindranath. Did he break away from the age-old beliefs and traditions? No. His conception of life was perfectly in tune with the teachings of the *Upanishad*. His poetry and songs were saturated with pantheistic thoughts and ideas which he drew from the *Upanishad*, and the Persian mystic poets like Hafiz and others. He saw the vision of his ‘Beloved’ in the moon, the stars and flowers and other beauties of Nature and perceived her footfalls in the stormy night behind the clouds; he heard her singing in the birds and whispering in the breeze. He feels constant pangs of separation from her and is ever anxious to meet her. Complete identification with her is the cry of his soul. His imagination ends there and cannot go beyond that. The following extracts from Rabindranath will bear me out:

(i) আমার মাথা নত করে দাও হে তোমার

চরণ ধুলির তলে।

সকল অহঙ্কার হে আমার

ডুবাও চোখের জলে ॥...

আমারে না যেন করি প্রচার

আমার আপন কাজে

তোমারি ইচ্ছা কর হে পূর্ন

আমার জীবন মাঝে। ..

—(গীতাঞ্জলি)

Bend down my head under the dust of your feet

Drown my egotism into my tears. . . .

Let me not express myself in my actions  
Fulfil thy will in my life.

- (ii) “তুমি আমার আপন, তুমি  
আছ আমার কাছে  
এই কথাটি বলতে দাও গো বলতে দাও।  
এই নিখিল আকাশ ধরা  
এষে তোমায় দিয়ে ভরা  
আমার হৃদয় হতে এই কথাটি  
বলতে দাও গো, বলতে দাও।”  
—(গীতাঞ্জলি)

Thou art my own, thou art my dear and near  
Let me say this, Oh, let me say this.  
This universe, this sky, this earth  
All are pervaded by thee.  
Let me say this, Oh, let me say this.

- (iii) “আজি যেন ভেদ নাহি রয়  
আপনা পরে  
আমায় যেন এক দেখি হে  
বাহিরে ঘরে।”  
—(গীতাঞ্জলি)

Let there be no distinction between you and me  
So that I may see myself at one with you, both in and out.

- (iv) আমার মাঝে তোমার লীলা হবে  
তাইত আমি এসেছি এই ভবে।  
সব বাসনা যাবে আমার থেমে  
মিলে গিয়ে তোমারি এক থেমে  
দুঃখ-সুখের বিচিত্র-জীবনে  
তুমি ছাড়া আর কিছু না হবে।  
—(গীতাঞ্জলি)

I have come to this world only as a pawn of your sports  
My own desires will die unto your pleasure and love  
And in weal and woe, none shall survive except you.

- (v) “মনকে আমার কায়াকে  
আমি একেবারে মিলিয়ে দিতে

চাই এ কালো ছায়াকে ।

তুমি আমার অনুভবে  
কোথাও নাহি বাধা পাবে  
পূর্ণ একা দেবে দেখা

সরিয়ে দিয়ে মায়াকে ।”

—(গীতাঞ্জলি)

I like to liquidate my mind and my body for ever  
So that you may reveal yourself as a complete Whole  
After removing this illusive body and mind of mine.

(vi) “রক্ষা কর হে ।

আমার কর্ম হইতে আমায় রক্ষা কর হে ॥  
আপন ছায়া আতঙ্কে মোরে করিছে কম্পিত হে  
আপন চিত্ত গ্রাসি হে আমায় রক্ষা কর হে ।  
প্রতিদিন আমি আপনি রচিয়া জড়াই মিথ্যা জালে  
ছলনা ভোর হইতে মোরে রক্ষা কর হে ॥”

—(ধর্ম সঙ্ঘীত)

Save me from my actions  
My own shadow terrifies me  
My own mind devours me  
I entangle myself everyday with my self-created snares  
Protect me from these clutches of illusion.

(vii) যা হবার তাই হোক

যুচে যাক সর্বশোক  
সর্ব সন্নীচিকা ।

নিভে যাক চিরদিন  
পরিশ্রান্ত পরিক্ষীণ  
মর্ত্যজন্মশিখা ।

সব তর্ক হোক শেষ  
সব রাগ সব ঘেঘ  
সকল বালাই

বল শাস্তি বল শাস্তি  
দেহ সাথে সব ক্রান্তি  
পুড়ে হোক ছাই ॥”

—(চিত্রা)

Let the inevitable come  
 Let all sorrows and illusions disappear  
 Let the lamp of this earthly life be extinguished for ever  
 Let all controversies, passions and jealousies go  
 And let the mind have the peace of eternal rest.

(viii) “সীমার গায়ে অসীম তুমি

বাজাও আপন সুর

আমার মধ্যে তোমার প্রকাশ

তাই এত মধুর ॥”

—(গীতাঞ্জলি)

Thou art Infinite, Thou playest thy music in the Finite  
 This is why Thy revelation in me is so sweet.

(ix) “পারবি নাকি বোগ দিতে এই ছন্দে।

খসে যাবার ভেসে যাবার

ভাঙ্‌চারই আনন্দে রে ॥”

—(ধর্মসঙ্গীত)

Won't you be able to join this rhythm  
 And pleasure of death, decay and disappearance?

(x) “ওগো আমার এই জীবনের পরিপূর্ণতা।

মরণ, আমার মরণ, তুমি কও আমারে কথা ॥

সারা জন্ম তোমার লাগি

প্রতিদিন যে আছি জাগি

তোমার ভরে বয়ে বেড়াই সুখ-দুখের কথা

মরণ, আমার মরণ, তুমি কও কথা ॥”

—(গীতাঞ্জলি)

Death, Oh my Death, speak unto me  
 Thou art the culmination of my life  
 I am waiting all the life for thee  
 Bearing the burden of sorrows and pleasures  
 Death, Oh my Death, speak unto me.

Innumerable instances can be cited like these wherein Rabindranath's conception of life in relation to God and the World has been revealed. Rabindranath is out and out a mystic poet of Pantheism, bordering, at places, on paganism. The burden of all his philosophic poems and songs is separation from, and hankering after complete communion with,

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his consort. Like the Vedantists and the Sufis, he also tries to flee from life and merge himself into the Ultimate Being. Death is the target of his life! The glorification of death and self-effacement thus constitutes his principal message to mankind. In a typical fashion he plays on soft sentiments of love and separation and does not bother about the duties and responsibilities of man towards God and the World.

*Iqbal*

Against this Idealistic-Pantheistic-Vedantic-Sufistic background of under-estimation of life, Iqbal boldly proclaimed the individuality and immortality of the Soul and its never-ending progress and development in our after-life. He says that this visible world is not a baseless fabric of fantasy; it is also real and meaningful. Man is also real and his Ego or Soul will not be absorbed as has been indicated by our fundamental article of faith: *La-ilaha-illallah Muhammadur Rasulallah*. (There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet). Here man has been bracketted with God and given the exalted position of His Viceroy. This proves that there is no intermediary in between God and Man and that man has limitless power and potentiality in him. Indeed man is destined to rule the universe as the representative of God. Evidently, as long as God is, man is. God is no doubt our Creator, but once He has created us, He will not absorb or annihilate us. It is His pleasure that we live eternally with Him. This philosophy, of course, is not his own; it is broad-based on the teachings of the Holy Qur'an which vouchsafes eternal life not only to the dwellers of Paradise, but also to those of Hell (*wa hoom fiha khalidun*). Iqbal has given a philosophic shape to this eternal verity of Islam. Herein lies his contribution. I quote below a few lines from Iqbal to corroborate my views:

In every atom slumbers the might of the Self. . . . .  
Inasmuch as the life of the Universe  
Comes from the power of the self,  
Life is in proportion to this power.  
When a drop of water gets the self's lesson by heart  
It makes its worthless existence a pearl.  
When the mountain loses its self, it turns into sands  
And complains that the sea surges over it. . . .  
Because the earth is firmly based on itself  
The captive moon goes round it perpetually,



The being of the sun is stronger than that of the earth  
Therefore is the earth fascinated by the sun's eye.

\* \* \*  
Life is preserved by purpose;  
Because of its goal its caravan-bell tinkles.  
Life is latent in seeking.  
Its origin is hidden in desire.  
Desire keeps the Self in perpetual uproar.  
Negation of life is death to the living.

\* \* \*  
Abandon self and flee to God  
Strengthened by God, return to thy self.

\* \* \*  
It is sweet to be God's Vicegerent in the world  
And exercise sway over the elements.

In this beautiful way, Iqbal narrates his philosophy of life. He gives new values to life and urges upon strengthening of the Soul, as he believes that, in the scale of being, the status of every object is determined according to the degree of strength it attains. As God is the perennial source of all power and success, and as man's is not yet a complete personality, it is essential that he should come in close contact with God for borrowing strength from Him. The motivating idea behind this should be not to absorb himself into God, but rather to absorb God into himself. There is a *Hadith* in support of this view. The Holy Prophet has said: "*Takhallequ bi Akhlaqillah*" i.e. mould your character in accordance with the character and Attributes of Allah. Indeed, the nearer is a person to God, the greater is his personality. A man full of divine qualities is the perfect man. Iqbal calls him "*Insan-i-Kamil*" or the Perfect Man, as opposed to Nietzsche's "Superman". Iqbal pays tribute to the perfect man in these two immortal lines:

خودی کو کر بلند اتنا کہ ہر تقدیر سے پہلے  
خدا بندے سے خود پوچھے بتا تیری رضا کیا ہے

Develop thyself, so that before every decree  
God Himself will ascertain from thee "what is thy will?"

In short, while the terminus station of Rabindranath's journey of life is God, that of Iqbal is Eternity. Iqbal is a through passenger, he does not stop at God, but goes further beyond. Rabindranath's span of life is, therefore, shorter than that of Iqbal, his outlook is also narrow and antiquated and mediaeval in character, having no dynamic appeal to this new age of space-flight and inter-planetary journey. Iqbal is the poet of today and also of to-morrow.