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Tagore's Concept of Humanism with Reference to Gora: A Study

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Abstract:

Today, the world finds itself in urgent need of the very insights which are the basic characteristics of Indian thought. India's insight of the spiritual nature of man and oneness of human existence and the underlying unity of the different systems of thought can provide the world today with that firm foundation on which alone a stable common wealth of nations may be built. Tagore became the voice of India's spiritual heritage for the world. His Gora propounds the eternal message of India to the world. Gora which is Tagore's notable achievement reflects all the diverse trends of the times, but it may be conjectured that the communal disharmony of the times when Gora was written had influenced Tagore greatly in portraying the age of the novel. That is, the mind of Rabindranath of the first decade of this century was projected into the times of Gora and he sought a solution to the fissiparous tendencies of his own times in the grand conception of Universal Humanism, which is the message of Gora.

Keywords: Humanism, spiritualism, universalism, Gora

1. Introduction

The word humanism has come to mean several things in the history of thought. It is an approach in study, philosophy, world-view or practice that focuses on human values and concerns, attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or super-natural matters. Humanism emphasizes common human needs seeking of solving human problems solely rational ways or somehow takes human nature, its limits, or its interest as its theme. It also asserts that the capacities, the characters, the qualities of man have to be given fullest expression. Thus man is the central concern of humanism.

Humanism started as a literary movement in Italy in the fourteenth century, as a revival of interest in Greek and Latin classics. The human element in these classics was discovered and a spirit of freedom and independence sprang out of it. This meant a revolt against the authority of the Church and a cry for freedom of thought. So eventually the literary movement became a social one which in its turn paved the way for a philosophical movement in which man was the center of all things. The famous maxim of Protagoras summarizes the basic thought of humanism: "Man is the measure of all things, of those that are that they are and of those that are not that they are not."¹

As far as India is concerned, Buddhism is a humanist movement. One could see in Buddhism a shift from a preoccupation with religion, doctrine and rituals to a concern for human problems such as suffering and death. Among the contemporary thinkers Vivekananda, Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, Tagore, M. N. Roy etc. enormously emphasize on humanism.

There are several types of humanism too. Humanism first sprang up in a religious context. This means a humanism which, accepting a particular religious, doctrinal framework, seeks to emphasize the role and centrality of man. Gandhi's humanism is based on religion, of course oriented towards the secular. His theology is the basis for his interest in man. Secular humanism is one which exalts man at the expense of religion. In this sort of humanism, there is a strong sense of optimism about man. Man can make history through his political and economic activities. He could better his life on this earth. There is no need to appeal to any transcendental power or external force to help in the ordering in the society. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is a supreme example of secular humanism. The extreme position of humanism would be atheistic humanism which explicitly denies the existence of God. It is interested in man solely in relation to society and history. The thought of Karl Marx, M. N. Roy can be termed as atheistic humanism. Scientific humanism takes scientific truth as its epistemological basis and rejects anything transcendental. It asserts that the essence of man consists in the aspiration, urges, and capacities of man and that they have to be given fullest expression. Spiritualism asserts that man has a spirit. Primarily humanism centers round man and asserts that the capacities, the characters, the qualities of man have to be given fullest expression. While scientific humanism holds that human aspiration consists in his desires, in his will to do something, spiritualism asserts that this is not all the case. No satisfaction is final; it always aspires for more- for going higher and higher (*nālpe sukhamasti bhumaiba sukham, jenāham nāmṛta syām kimāham tena kuryām?*). Spiritualism is nothing but trying to satisfy those urges of man that transcend the normal physical level. If humanism is allowed full expression both the kinds of aspirations will have to be satisfied. In this sense spiritualism no longer remains incompatible with humanism.

2. Objective

This paper is a humble attempt to elaborate Tagore's concept of humanism with special reference to his most fascinating and famous novel *Gora* (1910). *Gora* is the mirror image of Rabindranath's mind and life which carries the message of unity or universal brotherhood among mankind negotiating caste, religion, nationality etc.

3. Analysis

In the galaxy of humanists of the 20th century, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the Nobel laureate, occupies a frontal position. Tagore's philosophy revolves round mankind that is why it is called humanistic. He was deeply influenced by the humanist tradition of Buddha. As the Humanist Manifesto II (1973) proclaims, "Humanism advocates the spirit of cosmopolitanism, international friendship and of the essential brotherhood of man."² Tagore was an internationalist who criticized the narrowly defined concept of nationalism and patriotism. He is a passionate Indian, but his nationalism transcends into universalism, where one may find a unique blending of the best of the East and that of the West. Tagore strived for a world where multiple voices were encouraged to interact with one another and to reconcile differences within an over-riding commitment to place and mutual interconnectedness. He wanted all human beings to be treated equally regardless of the country or nation to which they belonged. He also did not want barriers between people even within the same nation- the barriers of caste, race and religion. With this in mind, he established the *Viswa-Bhārati*, the International University in Bolpur on 22nd December, 1921. The motto of which is – mirroring the macrocosm world in the microcosm of a single place (*Viswa Yātrā bhātyekanidam*). A number of scholars from Britain and Harvard came to *Viswa-Bhārati*. Here Tagore endeavored to establish spiritual fellowship through cultural unity. An international world-order is to be evolved out of the culture of unity of different races. As a humanist, Tagore glorified man and elevated him to a high pedestal. He accorded the highest place to man in the universe. To him, "Man is not only the measure of the Universe but the creator of the Creator."³ His view was that man must come out of the shell of his individual self in order to enter into the large self of humanity. In his theory of humanism there is a strong and fervent desire to serve God through mankind and hence it is more inspiring and appealing. In pursuing spiritual humanism, Tagore puts emphasis on man. Man is an end in himself. God is simply a symbol of human perfection. It is the consciousness within a man that makes him perfect. The perfection that an individual attains is not his personal possession. It is also aimed at the benefit of society. So, selfish individualism is sacrificed at the altar of broader spiritual humanism. Humanism seeks to be a modern, cosmopolitan and democratic alternative to traditional religion and to authoritarian and other oppressive social attitude as well. Although Tagore came from an orthodox religious family, the Humanist in him opposed meaningless rituals, irrelevant devotional practices and other superstitious beliefs.

One of the main strands of thought that characterizes Tagore's writings is harmony-between man and man, community and community and ultimately union between the limited and the unlimited. Cosmopolitan feelings are explicit in his writings and paintings. Tagore's internationalist thoughts and attempt for making united world is appreciated all over the world. The concept of humanism in Tagore's philosophy is otherwise known as world-humanism. It is highly gratifying to note that UNESCO had taken initiative in celebrating Rabindranath Tagore's 150th birth anniversary the World over in 2010 with the conviction that "The characteristic poetry of Tagore carries the essence of universal humanistic values."⁴ With his message of harmony Tagore travelled all over the world preaching the gospel of world or universal humanism.

Tagore has articulated his thought on world-humanism in poems, essays, songs, so far as the novels are concerned, he has expressed his thought on the subject only in *Gora* (1910). The novel created serialized at the turn of 20th century, is regarded as an important milestone in the history of Indian fiction. It arouses debates over the number of issues and concerns that are very contemporary and relevant to our times. Through the various characters and their stories of the novel Tagore has raised almost every single concern of the society. He was always in favour of classless society. His social reform starts with the rejection of castism and untouchability, which are considered by him to be the darkest blots in the society and *Gora* clearly reflects the notion of a classless society. It infact, brings to light his conception of the caste system and untouchability which are still prevailing in our society. He never wanted the distinctions among individuals. Tagore says, "In her caste regulations India recognized differences but not mutability, which is the law of life."⁵ In '*Gītāñjali*' Tagore also refutes the notion of untouchability and says, "Come Brāhmin purifying your mind and clasp the hands of all."⁶

The source of world- humanism that is reflected in the novel *Gora* has been discovered by Tagore in India's basic pursuit of human welfare. Since unity in diversity is the watchword for the socio-cultural history of India through centuries, contrary forces are no destabilizing factors in the fabric of life but make a harmonized whole by merging in the mainstream. Speaking of the character of unity pursued in India, Tagore says that through centuries India has come to lay, with various materials, the foundation of the unity oriented civilization which is the ultimate for mankind. "She has never cast away anybody as something foreign, has not driven out anybody as non-Aryan, and has not ridiculed anything as something incongruous. India has accepted everything, has absorbed everything."⁷

Rabindranath had deep love for ancient Indian Hindu culture. His humanism manifests the age-old philosophy of our country. Inspired by this ideal of unity and cultural absorption that followed by India through centuries, Rabindranath thought that this country was most favourable for the growth and development of the concept of world-humanism. Tagore says, "In India the vast problem of the global man will be solved."⁸ It is for this reason that though he was steeped in love for his country, he was inspired by the ideal of world-humanism, and followed it not only as an ideal but translated it into practice. The mystique of faith in life and man that led to Tagore's sublimation from humanism to world humanism was without doubt rooted in his close study of the Upanishads. The main source of inspiration for his concept of world-humanism is surely the first śloka of the Ishopanishad, which says:

“Isha bāshyamidam sarbam yatkinsha jagatyam jagat” i.e., everything belonging to this world is enveloped by God. There is no doubt that Tagore’s concept of world-humanism is the result of the conceptualization of divine presence in everything belonging to this world.

Another śloka referred by Rabindranath himself expresses the same idea which shows the depth of his indebtedness to the Upanishads for his concept of world-humanism:

“Yastu sarbāni bhutāni ātmanyebanu pasyati Sarbabhutesu Chatmanām tato no bijugupsate”. i.e., one who sees all the living beings inhering in the Supreme Soul and vice-versa does not hate anybody.

The concept of world- humanism of *Gora* is slightly different from the Christian concept of universalism. It is above all sense of religion; nationality- everything is merged to make a greater concept of humanity. *Gora* tells the story of its protagonist’s border-crossing. In his grand conception of united India different races merge into one and divisions are blurred: In ‘Bhārattīrtha’ Tagore says,

*“Come O Āryan, come Non-Āryan, Hindu and Muslim,
Come today ye Englishman, ye Christian.
Come ye Brāhmin, purifying thy mind.....
Come ye fallen, remove all the burden of your humiliation.
.....
.....
Come to this grand sea-shore
Confluence of the Indian people”⁹*

At the opposite pole of Tagore’s world-humanism is nationalism which impedes the growth of world-humanism and which divides nations on narrow separatist lines. For *Gora*’s transition from narrow Hinduism to a grand concept of Universal Humanism reflects the evolution of Tagore’s own thought-processes. He denounced the narrow spirit of nationalism. Nationalism is responsible for the evils. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India’s troubles. Tagore preferred internationalism to nationalism. He stood for the people and not for the nation. Tagore was the true patriot. His patriotism is quite compatible with universal love and like Jesus Christ dreamt the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Tagore began to think instead if Hindu Nationalism could be made to transcend into Universal Humanism. He advocates self-power, constructive patriotism and union of the masses. In his own country, seeing this spirit at work, he warned his countrymen against the spirit of international harmony and understanding. Tagore dissociated himself from the Swadeshi Movement when it began to develop on unhealthy lines. Then at the height of the noncooperation Movement he denounced the burning of foreign cloth which was likely to foster the spirit of hatred and exclusiveness. He says, “Swarāj is not our objective. Our fight is a spiritual fight- it is for Man.”¹⁰

That Tagore preferred internationalism to nationalism has been presented in his celebrated *Gītāñjali* as -

*“Where the mind is without fear,
And the head is held high
.....
the world has not been broken up,
Into fragments by narrow domestic walls,
.....
.....
My father,
Let my country awake.”¹¹*

We have the knowledge that Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi supported the caste but abhorred the rigidity of it. Gandhi believed in Varnāshrama dharma on the basis of division of labour. Tagore found the fundamental defect inherent in the caste system. He straightly refused that birth and Saṁskāras could make one Brāhmin and Śudra. So for him all men are equal by birth. Fitness acquires not from birth but from character. The practise of untouchability which is also another darkest stain in Indian society carried some degenerated germs to society which may become a disintegrating force in the society. Gandhi also rejects untouchability. Śudras who are known as untouchable named as Harijan (people of God) by Gandhi. Tagore was able to shake off all shackles of traditional Hinduism and arrived at a non – parochial an inclusive concept of India. Tagore discovered it, first presented by Rammohan Roy in 1828, and rooted it in Indian history and propagated it through the century.

India is vast in its area and is diverse in its races. But India has tolerated difference of races from the first, and that spirit of toleration has acted all through her history. For Tagore, her caste system is the outcome of this spirit of toleration. Even in the modern time of science and technology, we the people are facing injustice for castism. Tagore should be appreciated for his unique view of castism.

The practical Vedānta of Vivekananda is similar with that of Tagore’s humanism on the ground that both believe in *Isa vāsyamidam sarvam*. Like Tagore, Radhakrishnan also tried for the synthesis of the East and the West and for the reorientation of the basic Hindu outlook. But the difference lies in the fact that where Radhakrishnan was theoretical Tagore was practical. His ideals got concrete shape in his Śāntiniketan.

4. Conclusion

The great men of the world all times sacrifice themselves for their fellow-beings. India has produced many great men forever. Tagore was one of those, who tried his best for the reorientation of basic Hindu outlook of life which lost its respect in the medieval time, and paved the way for many social evils. In different essays and discussions, Rabindranath highlighted the extension of Hinduism into all-

embracing humanity through its newer expositions. For him the catalyst of change is the ideal of unity pursued in Indian tapoban life or the ideal of oneness. Tagore has himself admits that he has great faith in humanity. Like the sun it can be clouded, but never extinguished. He is hopeful for the time when the spirit of age will be incarnated in a complete human truth and the meeting of man will be translated into the unity of man. It is becoming increasingly clear that mankind is now facing the most severe crisis in its history. The current economic recession and financial crisis around the world, and the continuing problems of environmental degradation, religious polarization and international terrorism have emerged as major concerns. So the question that now rises whether man will destroy himself in the process or be able to create a new and better world with courage and vision. Tagore like other humanists have a positive message that mankind can survive and human beings can enjoy a significant and purposeful life. By dint of their vision, mission and action they hold up the banner of human values- truth, love, beauty, brotherhood, forbearance, peace and harmony.

5. References

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