

## RABINDRANATH TAGORE ON VALUES

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at a comprehensive study of the collection of Rabindranath Tagore's lectures in the book '*Sādhanā*' which fundamentally deals with his concept of values. On various occasions in his lectures Tagore severally lays emphasis upon the notion of values and at the same time shows how the true essence of value are finally subsumed under the value of love. The '*Sādhanā*' is compiled of eight lectures which is intended to show that in order to be perfect in life one must participate in an unending journey through harmonious bond of love.

**Key-words:** Truth, beauty, personality, soul, surplus, freedom, creative activity, divinity.

In this paper an attempt will be made to institute a critical study of Rabindranath Tagore's position on Human Values with special reference to his work '*Sādhanā*'.

At the outset let us explain the subject matter of this collection of papers entitled '*Sādhanā*'. So our contents of Tagore's '*Sādhanā*' has been neither philosophically dealt with nor critically adjudged from the scholastic point of view. The Upanisadic thought was reflected in Tagore's writings, because he was brought up in such a family where the verses of Upanisads were chanted and taught in daily worship. Perhaps because of this philosophical environment and orientation, we get the touch of Upanisadic philosophy in his great writings. So, it might be expected that through these papers Western readers will have the chances of getting in touch with the spirit of ancient India as reflected in our religious texts. But Tagore has cautioned us to evaluate his writings neither by logical interpretation nor by the concatenation of words but by intuition i.e. the spirit – the spirit which unfolds itself.

Tagore was never a moral philosopher in the academic sense of the term. He never intended to propound moral theory like Kant and Aristotle. But if we look at his great writings on philosophical issues, we will find that he was mainly concerned with the general prescription for a perfect life. Traditional or conventional moral philosophy is very narrow or limited in its scope to obtain the essence of Tagore's value-system. The question of values and their proper application in life is the thrust area in his philosophy. Tagore's value-scheme was not solely concerned with the sense of 'ought' but also with that of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. The central issue in Tagore's philosophy was freedom and creativity. So, the concept of freedom and creativity altogether result in an integrated system where we get the notion of the metaphysics of the self. Upliftment of self leads a man from lower being to higher being of perfection. In this journey from lesser self to greater

self or, in other words, from the state of bondage to that of freedom, man extends this realm of relationship and thus he gets connected with the universe. Unity with the universe is not possible, according to Tagore, through the method of argumentation or reasoning. This sense of unity is to be felt within one's own consciousness. There are two means to have the actual realization of the unity in the universe, as prescribed in the Indian tradition. One is the path of argumentation i.e. ratiocination and the other is that of emotion. Tagore has opted for the second one. It might be the cause that Tagore was influenced by the philosophy of Upanisads. He was neither interested in ontologizing the Upanisads nor in the logical interpretations of the Upanisads, rather he has observed the attitude of the stages of life and death.

Human feelings and human sentiments were of utmost importance to Tagore. He wanted to focus on the value of human freedom in his proposed scheme of thought in *Sādhanā*. By emphasizing the importance of human freedom, Tagore directed us to regain self-reliance as a stepping stone to attain freedom. Self-reliance, according to Tagore's frame-work, can be obtained by inculcating certain virtues in us. These virtues are purity in thought, feeling and will as referred to by Tagore. Institutions are the integral part of our society and these institutions, on their part, cannot ensure moral practice even when the principles of justice should be at the basic level of those institutions.

Tagore observed that a crucial moment has come and we are to be cautious about the fact that it is futile to replace one system by another unless the individuals belonging to these institutions can go beyond their narrowness like greed, jealousy, hatred. These are the roots of violence and unhappiness. Man's inner strength along with their mental set-up requires to be groomed properly. Without the proper mental framework, no virtues and values can be cultivated. Individuals who have not conquered over their instinctual desires and greed will corrupt our society. Such corruption will contaminate from local level to global periphery. Tagore remarks:

*"We have forgotten this simple truth that all systems produce evil sooner or later when the psychology which is at the root of them is wrong..... Because we are trained to confound good system with moral goodness itself, every ruined system makes us distrustful of moral law"*<sup>1</sup>

Tagore's thought on humanism shows that he did not believe in the religious sects, institutions and personal god. Tagore's concept of religion is flexible in nature that it continuously accepts and rejects, thinks and doubts, progresses and changes. This dynamicity of religion is exclusively found in Tagore's thought. It is solely for the sake of the growth of human beings, i.e., it directs man towards the unity with universe.

Man's inner strength can be developed through the control of desires and the sublimation



of greed. This concept of Tagore resembles the teachings of the Buddha. Gautama Buddha has laid emphasis upon the psychological purification of human being that is found in eight-fold path of Buddhism. He has never preached us to have a complete denial of the desires of our sense organs. For this reason virtue of moderation and control over desires is to be cultivated. Tagore used to believe that Buddha focused on the practical aspect of the teachings of the Upanisads – that man can easily follow the path of Upanisadic philosophy. The Upanisadic message resembling that of Buddha is as follows:

*“With everything, whether it is above or below, remote or near, visible or invisible, thou shalt preserve a relation of unlimited love without any animosity or without a desire to kill.”<sup>2</sup>*

Another important aspect of Tagore’s philosophy of Humanism is ‘personality’. Man, for the sake of greater being, is not merely a physical being. There lies something more in man than what he appears. There lies a divinity residing in man and this divinity can be manifested through creativity and freedom. Many contemporary thinkers may not admit that this concept of divinity as dwelling in them. By this notion of divinity Tagore refers to man’s inner power i.e. his inner world of personality. In order to achieve this notion of divinity, as Tagore proposed, we need not deny the law of nature. We cannot get in touch with divinity by conquering nature. There is no room for defying the laws of nature in Tagore’s scheme of thought. Let me quote Tagore again to substantiate what has been just said.

*“Only by discovering the law and following it, do we become great, do we realize the universal, while so long as our individual desires are at conflict with the universal law, we suffer pain and are futile.”<sup>3</sup>*

We find the finite and the infinite as residing simultaneously in human existence. Both of them are equally real and equally important. Nature has her distinct laws and man has the inner world of personality. Man cannot disobey the law of nature rather he is to obey the laws, and at the same time he has a distinct personality with an autonomy of will.

Tagore tells us :

*“Things are what they are, and we have to know them if we would deal with them, and knowledge of them is possible because our wish is not their law.”<sup>4</sup>*

Knowledge of the finite brings forth the factual knowledge. But this factual knowledge cannot be the end-in-itself. In order to make this factual knowledge we are to acquire the knowledge of truth. Every event in life is causally related and this relation of causality leads us to the laws of nature. Tagore remarks in his *Sādhana* :

*"Law is the first step towards freedom and beauty is the complete liberation which stands on the pedestal of law."*<sup>5</sup>

Tagore's philosophy preaches the way to transcend the laws even also obeying the laws. Tagore did not say that we are to disobey the laws in order to get freedom. By obeying the laws of nature we grow in strength. The evolution of man, as proposed by Tagore, is possible by a transition *"from the law to love, from discipline to liberation, from the moral plane to the spiritual."*<sup>6</sup> Buddha has prescribed us a discipline of self-restraint and this would be the means to live in a moral life i.e., a complete acceptance of law. But, according to Tagore, this bondage of law cannot be the end-in-itself. Tagore preaches us that we are somehow to go beyond this finitude of the laws so that we could be able to come in touch with the infinite manifesting through the *'finite forms of laws'*.<sup>7</sup>

Relatedness is the key concept in Tagore's philosophy. This principle of relatedness ultimately results in the communion with the universe. This ultimate relation throughout the universe is made possible by a transformation. At the stage of beginning, our knowledge solely concentrates on physical nature. Tagore says – *"We wish to enjoy our food and drink, we hanker after bodily pleasure and comfort."*<sup>8</sup> Hanking after bodily pleasure and comfort is not always conducive to our well-being. While being confined within the realm of our physical body, we turn our vision too a more holistic approach, that we realize the unity of the parts. Apart from this physical body, we have a greater body i.e. the social body. In the social life man wants his pleasure and license or sanction of the works done by him. But still there is a wish dwelling in us that is for the sake of the welfare of the society. It is not true that man always works for the sake of himself, but rather for the sake of society. So, the wish transcends the limits of the present and the personal. In Tagore's philosophical thought, the principle of relatedness is possible by the transformation from the independent self i.e., self confined within the realm of selfhood, to the unified self i.e., harmonious self. The harmonious self in Tagore's version is called soul.

Freedom, according to Tagore, is of two types – positive and negative. The Self is conscious of its separateness and it enjoys freedom that permits to be detached. Negative freedom is a kind of sanction or license. Negative freedom, according to Tagore, can be enjoyed by accessing self-will. Tagore points out that *"Our self-will has freedom up to a certain extent; it can know what it is to break away from the path, but it cannot continue in that direction indefinitely. For we are finite on our negative side."*<sup>9</sup> Man has been given the freedom to be detached from his surroundings. Man has been continuously creating different symbols to give shape to his dreams, by means of his self-will. These symbols have ultimately taken the different forms of institutions, dynasties and



of theories. So, these symbols at last result in differences in every sphere of life. In order to get rid of this problem of evil deeds or anarchy, we must come to an end of our evil doing. Evil doing cannot be infinite in nature and cannot be an end in itself. So we are to access our freedom in a positive way that we can come out of this problem of evil. At some point man will have to search for some principle of harmony. Positive freedom leads us to goodness, love and ultimately towards harmony. Tagore maintains that any form of eternal integration can be achieved through love. Love integrates two souls and at the same time leaves sanctions of accessing freedom. When man makes a gulf with himself as well as with his surroundings, he gets conscious of his soul, of his personality and comes in touch with positive freedom.

Tagore says that the realization of our soul has two aspects- moral and spiritual. Apart from the spiritual side, the moral side cannot be cultivated in us. The cultivation of the merely moral aspect leads us to a sort of narrowness and ultimately to what, in terms of Tagore, is "*the intolerant arrogance of goodness*."<sup>10</sup> The application of solely, on the other hand, the spiritual side of the nature of soul directs us towards a still darker area i.e. '*intemperance of imagination*'.<sup>11</sup> Tagore says that when the two sides of the soul work in union, only then the realization of our soul is possible. To make this notion clear to us, Tagore referred to here the teachings of Buddha which is as follows:

*"The teaching of Buddha is to cultivate this moral power to the highest extent, to know that our field of activities is not bound to the plane of our narrow self. This is the vision of the heavenly kingdom of Christ. When we attain to that universal life, which is the moral life, we become free from bonds of pleasure and pain, and the place vacated by our self becomes filled with an unspeakable joy which springs from measureless love."*<sup>12</sup>

From the above mentioned quotation, it is clear to us that moral power leads us to the way of freedom. Tagore holds that neither desire nor reason can be the motivating force for moral action. Tagore respects the value of being rational but he does not ascribe the highest position to it. Tagore does not accept any notion of the categorical imperative like Kant which is the universal moral law. Tagore, on the contrary, does not associate the notion of morality with that of universality. But Tagore's concept of universal life can be compatible with Kant's notion of 'kingdom of ends'. The difference between these two lies only in the realm of its unifying principle. The unifying principle on Tagore's part is love for all, whereas, for Kant, it is reason.

Main stream moral theories in the West propose their concept by representing a moral agent who is disciplined and tailored by certain moral laws. The foundation of such moral system is based upon the principle of homogeneity. Tagore differs from them at this point. Tagore maintains

that universe is ontologically one and it is united. Each individual dwelling in this universe is distinct. Distinction and separation are, for Tagore, are considered to be two aspects of the same thing. For him, this distinction can be accepted through the concept of dynamism and freedom. Tagore suggests that the concept of dynamism is to be accepted in all the sphere of the universe. The notion of dynamism and freedom can be practiced through man's creation. Tagore in his 'Personality' thus says,

*"We create not only art and social organization but our inner nature and outer surroundings, the truth of which depends upon their harmony with the law of the universal mind."*<sup>13</sup>

But morality, for Tagore, was neither to suppress the creative spirit of man, nor to take a puritan approach to human living. On the contrary, it is equivalent to an expression of man's freedom. Man is as creative in his moral decisions as he is in his artistic creations and enjoyment. In this context Tagore made a distinction between 'construction' and 'creation'. While 'construction' as a utilitarian connotation, the concept of creation is indicative of man's freedom and urge to go beyond the immediate necessities of his living in the world. Construction is for a purpose, it expresses our wants, but creation it for itself, it expresses our being. To Tagore- "For creation is freedom... But in our creation we live in what is ours, and there more and more the world becomes a world of our own selection."<sup>14</sup> Construction is purposive and hence to some extent it is the material. Again, 'expression' and 'the material' are also evaluative contraries. Expression, he points out, belongs to a different plane from that of its material; it is something analyzable. Construction and the material have their legitimate place in the scheme of life. No expression of our private self is moral enough unless it is an expression of what brings us into a relationship with others, with the rest of the world. That alone can be the standard of moral judgment. Creativity involves universality as per its own nature. Therefore, in case of aesthetics, philosophy or ethics we do need to have the ampler air of a free soul. Creativity is also an operation of will, a creative will. Man seeks to organize his data of experience. Man's nature is a harmony or unity of his knowledge and the imagination, and it is this unity that is revealed in art as well as in his moral actions. Knowledge and emotions are integrated in creativity.<sup>15</sup> It is to be borne in mind that for Tagore there is a conceptual connection between human freedom and imagination. Man by virtue of his artist nature freely fashions his probable image and tries to materialize it. To him, to exist in this world is to be creative. Without creativity an existence is not as such. 'A human being is infinite' means 'infinite potentialities' which are inexhaustible.

History evidences that man's freedom is never saved of its troubles. In human history we come across some sufferings about which animals do not have any idea. Tagore said-" In the



turning of the instruments discords have shrieked loud, and strings have often snapped... every mistake and misfit has come as a stab and the world soul has bled and groaned... There have been hypocrisies and lies, cruel arrogance angered at the wounds it inflicts, spiritual pride of power that insults God calling him its ally; there has been the smother cry of centuries in pain robbed of its voice, and children of man mutilated of their right arms of strength to keep them helpless for all time; luxuries have been cultivated upon fields manured by the bloody sweat of slavery, and wealth built upon the foundation of penury and famine.”<sup>16</sup>

Tagore’s concept of freedom is deeply related to his concept of personality. ‘Personality’ is a key concept in Rabindranath Tagore’s Philosophy of man. In ordinary language, the concept of personality has a psychological sense. We use the concept to make some special feature of some individual’s apparent, and to emphasize his/her separate identity. We say, for example, “Mr. Smith has a strong personality”, “His personality clashed with that of his senior”, “Mother’s personality is very important for a child”. Tagore’s concept of Personality is different from this ordinary conception of it.

“Person” which in English language is derived from *Persona*, meaning *mask*, signifies, in Tagore’s context, a human competence to assign forms to the world, and introduce new forms of existence. Tagore thus traces the appearance of mask to a deeper reality. The inner core, from which consciousness takes its direction to the world, is, according to Tagore, “Personality”. To him ‘Personality’ is a self-conscious principle, of transcendental unity within man, which comprehends all the details of facts, that are individually his knowledge and feeling, wish and will, and work. In its negative aspect, it is limited to the individual separateness, while in its positive aspect; it ever extends itself in the infinite through the increase of its knowledge, love and activities. To Tagore-”We have seen that consciousness of personality begins with the feeling of separateness from all and has its culmination in the feeling of unity with all. It is needless to say that with the consciousness of separation there must be consciousness of unity, for it cannot exist solely by itself... But the life in which the consciousness of unity is the primary and separateness the secondary factor, and therefore the personality is large and bright in truth; - this is the life of soul.”<sup>17</sup>

Man creates art for the sake of truth underlying in it and this sustains the inner growth of human being. This truth, i.e., the success depends upon the capacity to maintain a harmony, i.e. the law of universal mind. Tagore believes in a creator of this universe. Such creator has been referred to by him as God. The notion of the creator is not pure consciousness as in Advaitism, but rather pure will, in Tagore’s system. Tagore never speaks of the creator of the universe in isolation,

rather he has also ascribed the role of creator to man. This concept of divinity of man and the humanity of God has brought Tagore a distinguished position from other philosophers. The concept of humanity of God and that of divinity of man has been found in his '*The Religion of Man*'. In Tagore's own words,

*"Our creations are mere variations upon God's great theme of the universe. When we produce discords, they either have to end in a harmony or in silence. Our freedom as a creator finds its highest joy in contributing its own voice to the concert of the world music."*<sup>18</sup>

From what has been quoted above, it is clear that our creation is not an imitation of God's creation. In our creation, we must have slavery of freedom. We are merely to follow the law of love and harmony as prescribed by the universal mind. According to Tagore, our creation would be fundamental and that would be 'creative unity'. Through creation, we must formulate the form. Form is always subject to modification and change. This formulation of form is completely left to the imagination of the creator. The motivating force behind man's creation is pure reason but for Tagore it is rather guided our emotion of love. Man is essentially a creative being.

However, it is important to note that there are three cardinal principles in Tagore's thought – surplus, creativity and unity. They are closely related to one another. Man has enormous capital with a surplus far in excess of the demands of the biological being. Surplus is a form of an abundance or superfluity. Surplus is a form of energy that can be expressed in various forms. Tagore remarks – "*Man has a fund of emotional energy which is not all occupied with his self-preservation. This surplus seeks its outlet in the creation of Art, for man's civilization is built upon his surplus.*"<sup>19</sup> There are mainly two types of activities as we find in man. One is the activity of his physical body which is guided by the laws of nature and is solely aimed at principle of the preservation of life. Another activity, on the other, is the activity of man's wills which is focused on self-manifestation. But these two parallel influxes of activities tend to mingle. Surplus transforms Man from a creature to a creator. Through surplus Man realizes himself in the perspective of the infinite and likewise the true essence of Man is manifested.

Out of the three principles, as mentioned earlier, creativity is the essence of Tagore's thought. To be creative, one is to achieve a unity of consciousness. Tagore's notion of consciousness is to be understood only in the context of his philosophy as a whole. Tagore says that art, culture, religion, philosophy and science are serving their purpose for the sake of extension of our consciousness towards higher and larger spheres. To be creative, one is to create a unity with others and that will ultimately lead to the absolute stage of creative unity. This process involves



several levels i.e. at the first stage, one is to be united with his natural surrounding, then with his society and finally he will be able to make a connection with the whole universe. Tagore says that the creative surplus is latent in every man and it has to be cultivated in such a way that the individual gets connected with the universe through a unique harmonious bond of love. Tagore holds that the culmination of a creation is possible through unity between the finite and the infinite. The spirit of love constitutes this unity and this spirit of love resides in the domain of the surplus. Tagore remarks, "Love is consummated through harmony, the harmony between freedom and freedom".<sup>20</sup> An individual becomes more when he is in union with others through the harmonious bond of love.

Through the above exposition of Tagore's thought, it should be clear how the concept of value gradually reveals its true essence and how all the values are finally subsumed under the value of love. In Tagore's thought system we find no specific philosophical methodology as usually found in Indian and Western tradition, rather his philosophy is an ideal form of 'process philosophy'.<sup>21</sup> According to Tagore, in order to be perfect in life one must participate in a journey of life through harmonious bond of love. This journey is an un-ending process. Harmony, for Tagore, is to be attained through creative unity and the relation is to be nurtured through creativity. That relationship will ultimately result in unity with the universe. In Tagore's philosophy, the notion of value is not solely associated with any particular ethical notion. Tagore in his schematization of thought uses this notion of value in a broader perspective where both the value of love and that of autonomy are upheld. The value of autonomy of the individual has been praised and love for all, simultaneously, has been given basic importance. To love all one must come out of his mental narrowness like selfishness. In the journey of man, Tagore has used the concept of Beauty, Truth and Goodness in an exquisite manner.

From the above explanatory survey of Tagore's view on Human Values it follows that Tagore's concept of value is not related to any principle of religion, or morality. It is also not to be achieved in isolation, but to be gained through all the dimensions of our life as a whole. Tagore has ascribed the highest position to the value of love and harmony. This aspect of his thought apart from his philosophical writings has been highlighted in his different literary works too.

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