

***So(a)hm* : The Mystical Approaches of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Rabindranath Tagore**

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Ego

Egotism is the root cause of all our worldly miseries. It entangles us in such a way that we fail to achieve our actual goal in life, which is to realize God. Sri Ramakrishna tells us that the cloud of egotism acts as a hindrance in seeing God. This egotism is our biggest enemy. We find a similar image in Tagore's songs—

1. '*Keno megh āshe hridayo-ākāshe,
tomāre dekhite deynā?
Mājhe mājhe tobo dekhā pāi,
chirodin keno pāina?*'
2. '*Ābar erā ghirechhe mor mon.
Ābar chokhe nāme āboron.*'
(Tagore, *Geetabitan*)

What is this veil that Tagore is talking about? This is the veil of ego that restricts a man from reaching his ultimate goal of uniting with the Supreme Being, the Infinite, and attaining enlightenment. Sri Ramakrishna describes this enlightenment as realization of 'Self' or the actual 'I'. To know the Self, he clarifies, is to realize God within one's own self. This ego or 'I' intervenes between *Jiva* and *Ātmā*. Sri Ramakrishna has categorized this 'I' as unripe I (*kānchā āmi*) and ripe I (*pākā āmi*). The ego that makes a man thirsty for and proud of worldly belongings is the unripe ego. According to the Master, the

feeling of mine, the pride of wealth, pride of quality, pride of post—all are unripe I. This unripe I is the small I, the devil. As long as this unripe I is there, there will be difference between *Jiva* and *Ātmā*. To realize God within one's own self is the actual realization of 'I' or Self. When man gets rid of this ego or unripe I, the thin cloud between *Jivātman* (individual soul) and *Paramātman* (universal Spirit) vanishes and we attain enlightenment—the actual realization of Self. The ripe ego, or the ripe 'I', as the Master says, is the ego that should be made a servant. Sri Ramakrishna simplifies this by saying that if this 'I' persists, '...make that rascal the servant of God, or His child.' The consciousness that 'I am the servant and He is the Master' is the ultimate achievement of our life. We need to realize that all that we claim as our own belongs to God. This realization unveils the truth that inside this *Jivātman* (individual soul) resides *Paramātman* (universal Spirit). When our 'unripe I' evaporates, we witness the spiritual union between the individual soul and the universal Spirit: *So(a)hm*.

The path towards a divine union

Tagore believes that no manifestation is possible without the union of contraries.

The manifestation and that which is manifested are contrary to each other. The manifestation of the Supreme, the Infinite takes place in this world within the Finite. Tagore believes that this contrast between the Finite and the Infinite has made the manifestation of the Infinite possible. There is harmony in the journey of the Finite towards the Infinite (Tagore, *Ātmār Prakāśh*). Tagore here holds the same opinion as Sri Ramakrishna. In his lectures in Upasana Mandir, he repeatedly recited the verses of *Isha Upanishad*,

*Ishāvāsyamidam sarvam yatkimca
jagatyām jagat /
Tena tyaktena bhunjithā mā gridhah
kasya sviddhanam //*

—All that is visible in this ever-changing world is enveloped by God who is circumambient. Sacrifice is the only form of consumption.

The annihilation of the ego to prepare oneself for the divine union has always been emphasized in Tagore's songs, e.g.,

*‘Āmār je sob dite hobe se to āmi jāni
Āmār joto bitto probhu, āmār joto bāni,
Sob dite hobe.’*

(Tagore, *Geetabitan*)

Tagore's striving for union with God has been captured in lines like,

*‘...Kee korile bolo pāibo tomāre,
rākhibo ānkhite ānkhite...
...tumi jodi bolo ekhoni koribo
bishoyobāsonā bisarjan...’*

(Tagore, *Geetabitan*)

From the various writings of Tagore emerges his understanding of the value of complete submission to the Almighty for the ultimate fulfilment of life. Tagore in his song ‘*Āmi jokhon chhilem andho*’ clearly states that the Supreme surrenders Himself to man when the latter sacrifices all his belongings and becomes a beggar:

*‘Je din tumi agnibeshe, sob-kichu mor
nile eshe
Se din āmi purno holem, ghuchlo āmār
dvando
Duhkhosukher pāre tomāy peyechi
Ānanda..’*

(Tagore, *Geetabitan*)

The poet's longing for a union with God brings him close to God through disaster as the closed doors of the poet's mind give way to let in the Supreme Being:

*‘...sokālbela cheye dekhi, dāriye ācho
tumi eki
Ghor-bhorā mor shunyotāri buker
‘pore...’*

(Tagore, *Geetabitan*).

In the seminal study of Tagore in Abu Sayeed Ayub's *Panthajoner Sakha*, the author reflects on the last line of Tagore's composition, *Hridoy āmār prakāśh holo*, where Tagore narrates how he finds each of his offerings has been accepted by God and how, at the same time, the Almighty surrenders Himself to the poet in an intense apocalypse—

*‘...ājke dekhi porān-mājhe, tomār golāy
sob mālā je—
Sob niye shesh dhorā dile gobheer
sorbonāshe.’*

(Tagore, *Geetabitan*)

Ayub points out that if the Supreme accepts all the offerings of His devotee, it would be fulfilment for him and not ruination. He mentions that this ‘*sob*’ or everything here may not be only the poet's worldly possessions but also the poet himself as the devotee. Tagore's hesitation in giving his entire self to God is evident in the song ‘*Āmār je sob dite hobe*’. The poet has listed all that he needs to sacrifice, except himself:

*‘...āmār bole jā peyechhi subhokhone
jobe / Tomār kore debo tokhon tārā āmār
hobe...’* (Tagore, *Geetabitan*). In the lines,

‘...sokoli nibe kere, dibe nā tobu chhere / Mon sore nā jete, felile eki dāye’, we find Tagore’s conflict of mind.

Why does *aham* (ego) exist?

Rabindranath Tagore, in his Santiniketan essays, clarifies the need of the existence of the ego. According to Tagore, in order to surrender the ego, man needs to own it first. Without the validation of his possession, man cannot fully surrender his ego. Before absolute submission of ‘I’ or ego, man needs to own it. Tagore beautifully notes that the Supreme has given man the authority to claim things as ‘mine’ so that he can have the joy of giving. It is in this joy that man’s delight in amassing material objects must culminate. Sri Ramakrishna suggests the same way to divert the course towards God. He mentions, if we cannot help but feel proud, let it be for God. This is beautifully echoed in Tagore, ‘*Sokol gorbo dur kori dibo, tomār gorbo chhāribo nā*’.

Tagore defines the perfect form of *Ātman* as *Ānandaswarup* or Ultimate Bliss, the perfect embodiment of joy. My ego helps me to collect ‘my possessions’ to feel the joy of abandonment. Sri Ramakrishna has mentioned how the true nature of *Ātmā* gets entangled within the cloud of egotism. For Tagore this *Ātmā* frees itself through submission. It collects only to give benevolently like the Creator, and this ultimate submission of all that it has collected as his own frees *Ātmā* to unite with the *Paramātmā* and become one with It. This brings the Ultimate Bliss or *Ānanda* (Tagore, *Aham*).

Mysticism and the transcendental assimilation

Tagore’s music has an impeccable capability of nurturing human mind so

that it may transcend the worldly or social self for a union with God. Sri Ramakrishna has mentioned a variety of *Bhāv* or emotions that we can adopt to form an inseparable relation with God. Among *Bhakti Bhāv*, *Sakhya Bhāv*, *Dāsya Bhāv*, etc., what is important is forming an informal relationship with God, where He is one of us. The idea of God portrayed in the various songs of Tagore also depicts that He is not a distant monarch; the Almighty is as much desirous of uniting with Man as he is attracted to the Divine.

According to Tagore, the existence of God is manifest within man himself. Tagore believes that God is not a separate entity from man. The individual self is identical with the Divine Self. Tagore has put man and God in the same position where it is not only man who approaches God, but it is also the Almighty who descends to man for union. This reciprocal dependence is the core of mysticism (Bandyopadhyay, 1981). There is a similar vision in the sayings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, where the Master assures us that one step towards God will lead to His taking ten steps towards us. Tagore has given expression to this mystic reality in many of his compositions. He uplifts this idea of unity when he says that the sweetness and ecstasy of the Divine is due to His manifestation within man—‘*āmār modhye tomār prakāsh, tāi eto madhur*’. Tagore believes that God also travels a long way like a companion to the wayfarer to express Himself and unite with man.

The mysticism in Tagore’s spiritual disposition is influenced by the ‘Baul’ and ‘Vaishnav’ spiritualism. The Bauls and the Vaishnavs visualize God as the *Moner Mānush* or the person of the heart. In *Geetanjali*, there is similar depiction of

God as the beloved as in the following song, for example—

‘Tāi tomār ānanda āmār ’por
Tumi tāi eshechho niche
Āmāy noile tribhubaneshwar
Tomār prem hoto je michhe.’

The eagerness of the Finite for a union with the Infinite seen in the cult of Vaishnavs or in the quest for *Moner Mānush* in the Baul songs is underpinned by the concept of *Ānandarupāmritam*, the ‘immortal form of bliss’.

While Sri Ramakrishna achieved the absolute state, where ego vanished into the Infinite, he preferred to keep a tiny trace of the ripe ego to enjoy his play with the Divine—‘*I want to taste sugar, I don’t want to become sugar.*’ Tagore believes in universal love and expansion of the mind to shed off the little ego within oneself. This, according to both the poet and the sage, is the path towards the spiritual assimilation that leads to our ultimate goal of *So(a)hm* (I am He). ■

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Ānando brahmeti vyajānāt /
Ānandāddhyeva khalvimāni bhutāni jāyante /
Ānandena jātāni jīvanti /
Ānandam prayantya bhisamvishantīti /

He realized that Bliss is Brahman. Out of Bliss,
verily, are these creatures born and being born, they live by
Bliss and into Bliss they return at the time of dissolution.

—Taittiriya Upanishad