

***Conceptual Analysis of Personal God Portrayed in Rabindranath Tagore's
Song and Poetry***

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The worshipping of personal God is a traditional religious practice in India since medieval period. The devotees use poetry, song dedicated to her/his God to worship the Almighty instead of the sacred Vedic hymns. This tradition was seen in songs (Bhajan) written by Mirabai, Tulsidas, Surdas and many more. This tradition was later carried on by various other Indian poet, lyricists and musicians. The great poet Rabindranath Tagore in his songs and poetries also followed the tradition of portrayal of his own personal concept of God. In this paper I would like to analyze Tagore's idea of personal God by analyzing the songs and poetries. Then I would like to do a comparative analysis between Tagore's idea of personal God and the concept of Brahman in Upanisads. In order to do so I would refer to the poems written in Gitanjali and some of the songs from Gitabitan written by Tagore and refer to some of the Shlokas (hymns) from Brihadaranyaka Upanisad, Kathopanisd and Chandogya Upanisad. In the conclusion I would try to show how Upanisadic Brahman has evolved into Tagore's personal God.

Keywords: Personal God, Upanisadic Brahman, Rabindranath Tagore's Song and Poetry

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Introduction

In Indian Culture and Society, spirituality has been the core essence of every philosophical, ethical and social discussion. Veda is considered to be the highest authority for the philosophical knowledge. Later *Smriti Shastras* like *Manu Samhita*, *Bhagavat Gita*, *Artha Shastra* and *Puranas* played a crucial role in supplementing the Vedic hymns but never questioned its authority. The metaphysical part of Veda is Upanishad which chiefly discuss about the Supreme God, *Brahman* and the creation of the Universe that is actually a manifestation of it. Later in the Medieval Period, the idea was fading away from the mind of the common mass because of the complexity and of the *Shastric* (Scholarly) language i.e. Sanskrit. Then the controlling role of spiritualism were somehow submerged in the material life. Then Bhakti and Sant traditions of India gave the spirituality a new life by trenching the water of worshipping of the personified, merciful God who is the epitome of eternal joy and bliss. The Upanishadic Nirguna Brahman who was beyond the grasp of the knowledge of an ordinary person became tied with a personal relationship (Dasya, Sakhya, Vatsalya and Prema) with the worshipper as Saguna Brahman. The Eternal Almighty God with no limit evolved in the form of Personal God who resides inside the heart of the worshipper with a more kin relationship than the Upanishadic Brahman.

The great poet, writer and scholar Rabindranath Tagore from Colonial Bengal being brought up in the cultural and religious evolutionary family was familiar with the ancient Vedic and Upanishadic literature as well as the medieval bhakti literature and Baul literature as well. The philosophy underneath these spiritual as well as metaphysical and mystical writings left a great impact on his mind. In his writings we can find an amalgamation of the Personal God as well as the Upanishadic Brahman. A picture portraying all the features of Brahman of Vedic period and Personal God of Bhakti tradition can be found in his poetries, songs and other writings. The God in Tagore's writing is very much present in the inner self of a man as well as it pervades all of the universe and beyond. He described the God as Advaita and Ananda (One and Pure Joy) which can be achieved by love. To quote Tagore's own word, "It is not the magnitude of extension but an intense quality of harmony which evokes in us the positive sense of the infinite in our joy, in our love. For advaitam is anandam; the infinite One is infinite Love..." [1]. In order to understand more of Tagore's hybrid view on God we have to understand the concept of God in Ancient Indian tradition and also the personal God in medieval mystic tradition.

Concept of God in Upanishad

In Upanishadic tradition God is considered to have two forms – Saguna (The one with attributes) and Nirguna (The One without attributes and thus inexplicable). Basically, there is only Nirguna Brahma or the God without attributes but the finite and impure mind of human cannot grasp the real nature of the Nirguna Brahman and thus get to know Him by imposing some attributes (like creator, destroyer and beholder of the universe) upon Him. Due to ignorance and impurity of mind which is caused by the attachment to the external material pleasures and being affected by the six eternal vices (*Kam*/ Desire, *Krodh*/ Anger, *Mad*/ *Ahankar*/ Self-pride, *Lobh*/Greed, *Moh*/ Attachment, *Matsarya*/ Jealousy) man refused to see the true nature of Brahma as all pervasive and fail to see himself as the manifestation of this One Supreme Being. Human finite tendencies deviate himself from the Supreme being by projecting himself to be different from Him (*Bheda Jnana*). Upanishadic preaching is to take the human from the prison of this finite life to the bliss of the infinite by teaching the mankind the knowledge that reveals the Infinite Supreme Brahman and make him (the man)

realize that he is no different from the Brahman. Thus, a man achieves the greatest goal (*Param Purushartha*) of his life 'Moksha' or liberation. *Upa + Ni + Sad*= The teaching that takes one to the realization of *Sad* or Reality or the Essential quality of all being.

In Upanishadic tradition Supreme God is described as *Brahman*. The nature of Brahman or the Supreme God has been described in the Upanishadic texts as what He is not or in terms of '*neti neti*'. Supreme God or Parabrahma does not have any attributes, does not possess any desires, cannot be described in terms of space and time. The Supreme God or Parabrahma is described in various Upanishadic texts as immanent as well as transcendent. For example, in Chandogya Upanishad it is said that;

'Sarvam khalvidam Brahma tajjalaniti shanta upasit' – [2. Chandogya Upanishad (3.14)]

Translation: Everything is Brahman Himself for everything comes from Him, sustained in Him and goes back to Him. The Universe is the manifestation of Him.

In this verse Brahman or the Supreme God is described as Someone who resides in every living and non-living creature of the universe but He is also someone who is also transcendent of this world. In Chandogya Upanishad the Mahavakya or the Main Verse said about the Brahman that;

'Tattvamasi' - [3. Chandogya Upanishad (6.9.4)]

Translation: Thou are He. In Brhadaranyak Upanishad it has again said that

'Soham' - [4. Brhadaranyak Upanishad (5.15.2)]

Translation: Thou are He.

These two verses mean that the soul or atman that resides inside the body of every living being is Brahman Himself. Here it is worth mentioning that in Upanishadic text even five elements are assigned a living form of Devata and considered to have life in that way. Fire, Water, Air, subjectify as *Agni*, *Varun* and *Pavan* respectively and are thus considered to be controlled by those gods. The Supreme Being is considerably wider than them but yet the ultimate source of all of them.

Now the question may arise that where does such vivid and wide Brahman reside? As it is said several times that according to Upanishadic philosophy Brahman is immanent as well as transcendent of the Universe, so Brahman resides everywhere. Analogically Upanishadic text describes that Brahman resides in the Lotus throne of the heart of human being.

Concept of God in Medieval Bhakti Tradition: Personal God and Concept of Bhakti

In ancient Hindu religious system, the right to worship the Almighty was limited to the upper caste people only. Manu smriti has clearly said that women and *Shudras* (the lowest in the caste hierarchy of Hinduism) have no right to worship the Almighty or to have the right to know/achieve the knowledge of the Absolute or *Brahma jnana*. But through bhakti movement the age-old tradition moulds the Almighty God into everyone's beloved personal God. Relation to the God has become interpersonal relationship like a mother to her child or a friend to a friend and becomes much more cognizable to the common mass of people.

Upanishadic Brahman thus evolved into the Personal God who is a beloved of the worshipper in Bhakti Philosophy. Although Bhakti tradition did not reject the essential nature of Brahman. Nature of Brahman was immanent and transcendent as explained in Upanishadic text. But the magnificent Supreme Brahman was not conceived as awful Almighty but the merciful beloved Almighty who love and being loved unconditionally.

Bhakti philosophy denied the fact that Shudras or the lower caste does not have any right to get Liberation. They have also rejected the ideals of gender discrimination in order to achieve the love of God. All they wanted is to achieve the love of God and unlike the Upanishadic Moksha that refers to *Sayujya Mukti* or the liberation through being unified with God. Rather the Bhakti philosophers have always proposed for the *Samipya Mukti* or the liberation in the direct servitude of God while maintaining the duality. In Bhakti philosophy God is portrayed as someone very keen and beloved to the devotee. The ultimate devotion assorted with love and self-surrender is the core idea of Bhakti tradition and the devotees are preached to be the epitome of such self-surrender. For example, in medieval Bengal Shri Chaitanya Deva was the bhakti saint and main preacher of Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition who was considered to be practicing such self-surrender which later made Him forget his own identity as an individual, He considered and mentioned Himself as a Krishna Devotee only.

Concept of God in Tagore's Song and Poetry (Gitanjali and Gitabitan)

I would like to quote some of the songs and poetries of Rabindranath Tagore and then make a comparative analysis of Tagore's God with Upanishadic God as well as Personal God first and then proceed to elucidate the idea of God in Tagore's own writing which is a conglomeration of both Upanishadic Brahman and Personal Merciful God.

In the following poems that Tagore has written in **Gitanjali** reflects the idea of Upanishadic Brahman.

1. *"Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again and fillest it ever with fresh life."* [5]

2. *"Simar Majhe Asim Tumi Bajao Apon Sur" / O Boundless Within bounds you play your own tunes* [6]

In this poem Rabindranath Tagore has beautifully explained the Infinite Brahman that resides in the heart of a devotee and thus making the devotee endless. The body (frail vessel) of the devotee has been reincarnated endless times and has been filled again with the infinite soul which is complete as they are filled with divine consciousness or *Purna*. In the beginning verse hailing peace of *Brihadaranyak Upanishad* it is said that;

*"Om purnamadah purnamidam purnat purnamudachyate
Purnasya purnamadaya purnamebabashisyate."*

[7. Shantipath, Brihadaranyak Upanishad]

Translation: This or that everything in this world is *purna* (filled with divine consciousness). If we take away infinity from infinity then only infinity remains which is complete and endless in nature.

Then there is another poem in Gitanjanli which is as follows:

3. *“Light, oh where is the light? Kindle it with the burning fire of desire!”* [8]

Explanation: In Vedantic explanation of Upanishadic text, the brahman is described as self-illuminated or *swaprakash* in nature like light. Here, in this poem Tagore has also mentioned that illuminating nature of God or Brahman while searching for Him. Tagore has also mentioned to burn all his earthly desires in order to achieve the Supreme God which is also a popular Vedic teaching. Brahman is also said to be covered by the veil of Maya or Illusion of earthly pleasures and that illusion refrains us from knowing the true nature of Brahman. This nature of Upanishadic God is portrayed in the following poem of Gitanjali.

4. *“That I should make much of myself and turn it on all sides, thus casting coloured shadows on thy radiance – such is thy maya.”* [9]

While some of the poems have portrayed God as the omnipotent, omniscient, infinite and vivid as Upanishadic God, some of Tagore’s poem in Gitanjali has also reflected the Personal God who is merciful, loving, loves and being loved unconditionally by His devotees.

5. *“Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?”*

Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down the dusty soil.” [10]

In this poem we can see that the God does not discriminate between the upper caste person like a priest and a lower caste person like a labor. He does not discriminate to share His love and care. He loves equally all His devotees irrespective of their caste, gender and class.

6. *“Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bond of delight.”* [11]

Here in this poem we can see that Tagore is seeking the liberation while maintaining the duality like a Bhakti Saint who wants samipyamukti. He seeks liberation in the bondage of relationship with the almighty and His creation.

7. *“I know thee as my God and stand apart- I do not know thee as my own and come closer. I know thee as my father and bow before thy feet – I do not grasp thy hand as my friends.”* [12]

In this poem Tagore clearly establish a personal relationship with the God as a father and Son which is a demarcating feature of Bhakti philosophy.

In the songs written in **Gitanjali**, Tagore has also portrayed the features of both Upanishadic Brahman and of Personal beloved God. In the following writings the features of Upanishadic Brahman can be found.

1. *“Satya Mangala Premamaya tumi, Dhrubajyoti tumi andhokare”*

Translation: You are the Truth, the Blissful and the Loving, Starlight in the darkness”
[13. Gitabitan Song Translated by Debjani Bose from www.geetabitan.com]

2. “*Anandaloke mangalaloke birajo satyasundara*”

Translation: You are honourably present with the halo at the blissful world. [14. Gitabitan Song translated by Anjan Ganguly, collected from www.geetabitan.com]

In the abovementioned two songs, Rabindranath Tagore has described God by His attributes. Tagore has mentioned that God is *Satya* (True or Real in nature), *Mangala* (that which stands for Good) and *Premamaya* (Full of love and mercy). In the later song Tagore has described God residing in the *Anandalok* or in the abode of Eternal Joy. In Upanishadic texts also we find that God has the following attributes: He is Real, Pure Consciousness and Pure Joy (*sacchidanandaswarupa*).

3. “*Shudhu tomar bani noy go he bandhu he priyo,
Majhe majhe prane tomar parashkhani dio*”

Translation: O my friend dear, not your words only. Extend your delicate touch towards me. [15. Gitabitan Song translated by Anjan Ganguly, collected from www.geetabitan.com]

Tagore has said through this song that he does not only want to hear the words that is spoken by the Almighty, but wants to realize His true nature by his heart with reverence. In Vedantic explanation of Upanishadic Brahman, Brahman is also described as someone who is conceived by the senses and perceived by meditation (*atma ba are drashtabya shrotabya nididhyasitabya*).

In the following songs we can find the portrayal of the **Personal God** having similar feature with Bhakti tradition.

4. “*He sakha mama hridaye raho*”

Translation: Be within my heart O my friend [16. Gitabitan Song translated by Anjan Ganguly, collected from www.geetabitan.com]

In this poem Tagore has tried to establish the interpersonal relationship with the Supreme Divinity.

5. “*Kar milana chao birohi*”

Whom do you desire to unite with, O stranger.

Where in the earthly forest you search for Him,....

Translation: Look into the splendour of the heart, the Lotus feet exists...[17. Gitabitan Song translated by Anjan Ganguly, collected from www.geetabitan.com]

In Bhakti tradition, the phase of life when the devotee knows the nature of Almighty but yet to feel His graceful mercy by himself (the devotee), is known as *Biroho* or the distant phase from the lovable. Tagore has portrayed that phase in this song very beautifully.

6. “*Dhaay jeno mor sakal bhalobasa prabhu tomar pane*”

Translation: May all my love flow O Lord, toward you, you only. [18. translated by Ratna De, collected from www.geetabitan.com]

Here in this song, we can find the feature of self-surrender or utmost devotion towards the God has been portrayed. This is also an essential part of Bhakti Philosophy as it has discussed in the earlier section.

Conclusion

In Rabindranath Tagore's writing we can found that God according to him is transcendent with eternal glory as described in the ancient Upanishadic and other Vedic texts yet someone very kin to him. Tagore's God is formless Brahman being manifested in every form in the universe. He resides in the heart of a worshipper as pure Joy and can be achieved only through unconditional love. It is a beautiful blend of both Upanishadic philosophy and Bhakti Philosophy. God in Tagore's philosophy is someone who resides inside the heart of the devotee, as well as in the mother nature outside where the devotee resides. God is inside as well as outside of Man. Thus, in Tagore's idea God is vivid, infinite, complete and does not possess any earthly desire but what HE truly seeks is the pure love in form of devotion from His own creation. He loves and at the same time wants to be loved. Tagore's God is epitome of grace and Beautiful in its ultimate sense.

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