

BUDDHIST HUMANISM OF RABINDRA NATH TAGORE

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Rabindra Nath Tagore, a poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, singer, musician, religious thinker and the founder of an experiential school Shantiniketan, was the first non-European to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Perhaps the most important figure in Bengali literature, he is a name famous outside of India as well. A self-confessed disciple of Gautam Buddha, Tagore as a believer in the idea of humanity and a worshipper of the religion of man, had strong admirations for Buddha and his doctrines. In his collection of essays *Sadhana, the Realization of Life*, Tagore says how much he is influenced by *Upanisada* as well as the great teacher Buddha;

"To me the verses of the *Upanisads* and the teaching of Buddha have ever been things of the spirit, and therefore endowed with boundless vital growth; and I have used them, both in my own life and in my preaching, as being instinct with individual meaning for me, as for others and awaiting for their confirmation, my own special testimony, which must have its value because of its individuality".¹

Born on May 7, 1861, Tagore went through all the important stages of Indian culture. Beginning from the Vedic age, he reflected on the Buddhist period, the age of the great epics the *Rámayana* and the *Mahábhārata*, and the age of the mystic saints of the Middle Ages. Even the most distinctive thoughts of renaissance India stirred him and found expression in his writings. Tagore is definitely the symbol of the true spirit of Indian thought throughout the ages.

It was by the end of the nineteenth century, with the reawakening of our national life that the greatness of the Buddha and the Buddhist culture started influencing India to a greater extent. Buddhist philosophy in retrospect found its expression in the literary field too. Few examples are - Girish Chandra Ghose's *Baddhadev Charita*, Satyendranath Datta's *Buddha Baran* and *Buddha Purnilna* Nabinchandra Sen's *Amitava Kabya*, and Satyendranath Tagore's *Buddha Dharma*. Both the elder brothers of Rabindra Nath Tagore wrote historical works on Buddha.

In fact Tagore's grooming coincided with the revival of Buddhism. No doubt it was his family that influenced the religious trend of Tagore's mind towards Buddhism but it was 'The Sanskrit Buddhist literature of Nepal', by Rajendralal Mitra that shaped Tagore as a true Buddhist follower. To Tagore, Buddha was a sentinel, living force he could feel. Tagore fostered a very high respect for Buddha and the places associated with him. He considered it a tool to shape India's destiny. In his critical appreciation of the *Dhammapada* Tagore says: "As the preceptor of the Geeta has endowed in it Indian thought with a precise religious shape, so in the *Dhammapada* a picture of the mental make-up of India has been delineated."²

Understanding the need of Buddhist philosophy for the youth, Tagore introduced Buddhism as a special course of study for the students of his unique school Santiniketan. The centre of Buddhist Studies by Tagore at Santiniketan is today one of the greatest symposiums of Buddhist culture. To quote Thomson, "He [Rabindranath Tagore] is almost more Buddhist than he is in sympathy with many forms of Hinduism that are most popular in his native Bengal."³ Tagore too declared his complete acceptance of Buddha path to a student at Karachi; "I also have one "guru". He is Buddhadev."⁴ Tagore visited Buddha Gaya to pay his gratitude and declared "I come to pay my gratitude in an auspicious occasion of *Vaishakhee Purnima* to the man whom I consider the superior of all on this Earth; I offer him here, today the homage I have offered him again and again in the deep privacy of my soul".⁵ With reference to Tagore's visit to Buddha Gaya, Mr. Krishna Kripalani writes: "Only once in his life, said Rabindranath, did he feel like prostrating himself before an image, and that was when he saw the Buddha at Gaya."⁶

In his essay *Buddhadeva* Tagore said " Why was I not born at the time when he had been physically present, walked the streets of this Gaya, the touch of whose feet had once purified this world? Why could not I have the good fortune of feeling the radiation of his Holy presence directly in my body and soul? ".⁷

From the above statements it is clear to us that how he was influenced by Buddha. Buddha was the only man in the cultural heritage of India, who influenced Tagore deeply. On the occasion of the sanctification of

the *Mulagandha Kuti Vihara* at Sarnath, where the Buddha preached his first sermon, Tagore's poem on the Buddha reads:

Bring to this country once again the blessed name
Which made the land of thy birth sacred to all distant lands!
Let thy great awakening under the Bodhi-tree be fulfilled.
Sweeping away the veil of unreason and let, at the end of an oblivious night,
Freshly blossom out in India thy remembrance!⁸

Never did emotions reveal themselves better as are expressed in these lines. Lord Buddha, the reformer, liberated mankind from the different forms of ritualism and superstitions and destroyed racial barriers between man and man. Here his reasoning, message of compassion, and ideal of non-violence affected many. His non-violence and compassion have had inimitable expressions in the works of Tagore. So the poet prays for a new birth of the Blessed One in this world which is now "wild with the delirium of hatred."

All creatures are crying for a new birth of thine.
Oh, thou of boundless life,
save them, rouse thine eternal voice of hope.
Let love's lotus with its inexhaustible treasure of honey
open its petals in thy light.
O Serene, O Free
in thine immeasurable mercy and goodness
wipe away all dark stains from the heart of this earth.⁹

Like Buddha, the course of the caste-system, colour discrimination and untouchability in the social life of the country pained Tagore deeply. Love for humanity was common to both. Tagore clearly stated that his main subject was the idea of humanity of our God, or the divinity of man. Tagore said that if we want to know religion, we have to go through our lives and observe them through our lives. As a philanthropist, Tagore himself worked untiringly spent a lot of money to relieve the distress due to poverty, food and famine, diseases, ill health and want of education in his own villages of Bengal. Malpractices in the name of scripture, sacrilege under the veil of religion and profligacy under the garb of convention hinder progress in every sphere of social life. Tagore had intense appreciation for Buddha's ethical teachings and his compassionate attitude towards His fellow beings. Teachings of Buddha are based on the simple and practical truth i.e. as we do, so we become. Buddha believed in Karma and rebirth according to their Karmaphala. No religious activity, rituals, sacrifices are needed to attain heaven. Human being can make their heaven here in this very world. Lord Buddha proclaims:

One does not become a Brahmin by birth.
One does not become an outcaste by birth.
One becomes a Brahmin by act,
One becomes an outcaste by act.¹⁰

Tagore followed Buddha's dictum thoroughly. Buddha humanism is what deeply impressed Tagore, who is himself a great exponent of humanity. Tagore, the writer paid homage to the Blessed One who placed supremacy of action above the so-called aristocracy of birth. Tagore glorified the eternal virtues of Buddhism through his three dramas the *Malini*, *Chandalika*, and *Natir Puja*, based on Buddhist stories. In the *Malini*, the royal princess named Malini, just like Buddha, wants to guide the people who are in darkness. Here universal Buddhist toleration is established against narrow sectarianism of the Brahmanical religion. *Natir Puja*, Tagore's music drama is based on Buddhist legend. In the *Natir Puja*, when Princess Ratnavali ironically expressed her disregard for Bhikkhu Upāli, born of the barber Sunanda (a son of a milk man) and Sunita (an untouchable), the nun Uppalavanna, replied: "Oh Princess! They are all equal in caste; you have no knowledge of the yard-stick of the aristocracy."¹¹ Here the impact of Buddhist philosophy on Tagore reveals itself. Buddhism has restored human rights to the under privileged, to those who were trampled under feet by the so called high-ups of the society. In the *Chandalika*, the revolutionary spirit of Tagore is manifest through the character of Prakriti, a low-born and untouchable girl. After her chance meeting with a Buddhist Monk, she becomes aware of her identity and individuality as a human being. She refuses to be treated as an untouchable now. Till now, by virtue of her accidental birth in a lower caste, she was neglected by each and every person belonging to the so-called upper caste, even by the hawkers of bangles and seller of curd. She was untouchable to other social members. Her much neglected nature was apparent, because it was imposed by the society and hence it was not her real character. She has got back her real character or realized her own character, when a Buddhist monk had accepted her hospitality by way of drinking water offered by her. The monk did not treat her as untouchable, but has offered her the honour of humanity. It is rightly pointed out by the Buddhist monk that she is after all a human being. Her being an untouchable is an

imposed identity, one having no actual reality and hence there does not arise any question of untouchability. Thus in Chandalika, Tagore had emphatically shown how an ordinary lady, under Buddhist influence, got transformed from an untouchable position to an honoured one.

Mahatma Buddha had his own set of rules and teachings. Buddha's virtue of ten commandments or divine rules (i.e. Dana, Sila, Karma, Niskarma, Prajna, Satya, ViT-ya, Adh_i~thana, Maitrf, Upeka) deeply influenced Tagore. Another means for attaining enlightenment, taught by Buddha is the practice of the eightfold path which involves qualities of correct seeing, and correct doing. These eight ways are of faith, right speech, right resolve, right living, right action, right effort, right concentration and right thought.

Buddha's system of three tier i.e. of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha meaning devotion, wisdom and Karma gives the completeness in Buddhism. This doctrine is also found in Tagore's ideology. Tagore too did not agree with the renunciation in action. He laid more emphasis on action. It can be seen in his Gitanjali, poem no. XI.

"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 pathmaker is breaking stone.

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 on the dusty soil".¹²

These precepts are intended as a support to our spiritual training and also a way of helping people to transform every dimension of their daily lives, their body, speech and mind. In the Bodhicarycwatara it is said –

"First he will diligently foster the thought that his fellow creatures are the same as himself. All have the same sorrows, the same joys, as I and I must guard them like myself. I will cease to live as self and take as myself my fellow-creatures. We love our hands and other limbs a member of the body then why not love other living beings as members of the universe? By constant use man comes to imagine that his body, which has no self -being is a 'Self, then why should he not conceive his 'self' to lie in his fellows also? ... Then, as you would guard yourself against suffering and sorrow, so exercise the spirit of help fullness and tenderness to the world".¹³

The basic question of philosophical anthropology i.e. 'what I ought to do as a man?' has a great appeal to Buddha as well as Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's drama '*Achalayataka*' and novel '*Gora*' make us clear that wisdom plays an important role in salvation. Echoing Buddha, in the *Atma Parichya*, Tagore said about the human religion;

"It is the religion that concealed in his mind to create himself. It is the inherent life forces that create the living being of the animal kingdom. The animal need not know anything about this life force. But man has another entity, which is bigger than his sentient being i.e. his humanism. This creative force within his life is his religion".¹⁴

Like Buddha, Tagore also provides a spiritualistic interpretation of human religion. Religion must involve a sense of humanness in it. It is an expression of inner and essential aspect of man. Tagore says "if it is the human aspect of this truth which all great personalities have made their own in their lives and have offered to their fellow beings in the name of various religions".¹⁵ It is clear that to Tagore, religion implies the acceptance of spirituality."Tagore remarks that religion is the spiritual truth".¹⁶ So, spirituality is the core of religion. Human's religion, according to Tagore, essentially makes him aware of a communication which is beyond the physical universe. This leads him to have faith in spiritual order.

Tagore's *Katha*, a collection of verses based on mostly Buddhist stories, represents this Buddhist model of religion, spirituality and renunciation. In *Srestha-Bhiksha*, *Mastakbikray*, *Nágarlaksmi*, *Mulyaprapti*, *Pujarini*, etc., the glory of renunciation as depicted in the verses inspired by the ideal of Lord Buddha has found no parallel in the history of the world literature. Here we see that a poor girl can dedicate her only piece of cloth to the Buddha and a mighty king wearing the clothes of a beggar becomes a recluse. Inspired by the ideal of renunciation, the dancing girl Sreemati can defy the royal sceptre of King Ajatashatru and does not hesitate to sacrifice her life for worship at the feet of Lord Buddha. Tagore gleaned all of these historical events of Buddhist India. Tagore, who travelled all over the world many times with the message of universal good, had in him the main object of universal love. This is exactly what the Lord Buddha propagated 2,500 years ago and handed over to his future generations. So the poet naturally discovered an affinity of mission and declared with all the emphasis his reverence for one of the greatest preacher Buddha.

The gap between these two thinkers is more than 2500 years. But still, their messages have been the same. Buddha's Doctrine is based on compassion, friendliness, love and non-violence. In this respect Rabindranath

Tagore was born in 19th century A.D. in Bengal and he also believed that, we all are the children of Supreme One and so there should be no scope for violence or hatred in this world.

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