

**SOCIO-CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL ASPECTS IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S POETRY *GITANJALI*****CAPT. DR. RADHIKA SUBHANKAR MUKHERJEE**Assistant Professor,  
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Thane**ABSTRACT**

*Rabindranath Tagore largely regarded as the outstanding creative artist of early 20th-century India. He was a renowned Poet, short-story writer, song composer, playwright, essayist, and a painter. He was also a great social and religious reformer, cultural ambassador and a great humanitarian. Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali has an unconquerable place in Indian English literature as it glorifies the rich culture of India. Rabindranath Tagore depicts his spiritual voyage towards the Supreme Being. It is a collection of devotional songs in which he offers his prayer to the almighty God. Gitanjali appeals to the readers with its oceanic depth expressed in simplicity, richness and variety, hopefulness and divine affirmation, humanization of the divine and also for the use of native imagery and symbols. Gitanjali is throws light on the social, cultural, traditional, spiritual and political statement of a nation. This paper is an attempt to study the socio-cultural aspect of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry 'Gitanjali'. This paper will also present the spiritual aspects portrayed in 'Gitanjali'*

**Key words:** Socio-Cultural, Spiritual, Freedom, Time, God and Love.

Indian History has witnessed the rise of many distinguished personalities who tried to burn ablaze all ugliness that are dominant in the country. Such personalities are fearless and are courageous to cross all the boundaries with firm determination. They are visionaries and are determined to go on a mission to make this universe a better place for all to reside in peace and harmony. Rabindranath Tagore is regarded as a Universal Man and renowned as Prophet of Humanism, who advocated for the banner of human value that is constructed upon peace, harmony, truth, love, beauty and patience.

Rabindranath Tagore largely regarded as the outstanding creative artist of early 20th-century India. He was a renowned Poet, short-story writer, song composer, playwright, essayist, and a painter. Tagore introduced new prose and verse forms and also the use of colloquial (Informal/Slang) language into Bengali literature, thus releasing it from the traditional representations or models that were grounded on classical Sanskrit. Tagore's creative talents earned him the sobriquet of Gurudev, Kobiguru, Biswakobi. In 1913 he

**Special Issue****267****5<sup>th</sup> April, 2023**Website: [www.langlit.org](http://www.langlit.org)

Contact No.: +919890290602

**One Day International Conference on "Language & Literature: A Form of Social Discourse" organized by****Department of English, Shankarlal Khandelwal Arts, Science and Commerce College, Akola (MS)****Indexed: ICI, Google Scholar, Research Gate, Academia.edu, IBI, IIFC, DRJI, The CiteFactor, COSMOS**



became the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature for his English translation of *Gitanjali- Song Offerings*. Tagore's versatility is observed in all his work of art: "there is scarcely a genre of literature – poetry, short story, novel, drama- which he did not enrich". (Gupta, 16) He artistically portrays the unpleasant social conditions that wrecks the souls.

Rabindranath Tagore was the leader of the Brahmo Samaj, which was a new religious sect in nineteenth-century Bengal. It tried to renew the ultimate monistic basis of Hinduism as laid down in the *Upanishads*. Tagore was educated at home. He was sent to England for formal schooling while he was Seventeen but he did not complete his studies there. Later Tagore along with his literary activities, he also managed the family estates. He also established an experimental school at Shantiniketan ("Abode of Peace") where he tried his Upanishadic ideals of education. He settled permanently at the school, which became Visva-Bharati University in 1921. Tagore from time to time participated in the Indian nationalist movement. He was a good friend of Mahatma Gandhi, the political father of modern India. In 1915, Tagore was knighted by the reigning British Government but he resigned within a few years as a protest against British policies in India.

Tagore had early success as a writer in his native Bengal and with his translations of some of his poems, he became quickly recognized in the West. In fact his reputation attained a shining stature that took him all over the world both for his lecture tours and tours of friendship. He was also renowned as a great cultural ambassador who carried India to the world and the world found place in his works. He was greatly significant in presenting our Indian culture to the West and vice versa. In India, Tagore became a great living institution and for the world he became the voice of India's spiritual heritage.

Although Tagore penned magnificently in all literary genres of literature but first of all he was a Poet. He also wrote many musical and dance dramas, all forms of essays, travel diaries and two autobiographies. Tagore to his credit also has numerous drawings, paintings, and composed music for his own songs.

*Gitanjali: Song Offerings* of Rabindranath Tagore is a masterwork which deals with the spiritual search that is experienced by every human being. Spiritual realities go beyond the borders of religion, nations and cultures. It can only be articulated in the universal language of poetry as we witness Tagore depicts his spiritual voyage towards the Supreme Being in *Gitanjali*. It is a collection of devotional songs in which he offers his prayer to the almighty God. *Gitanjali* appeals to the readers with its oceanic depth expressed in simplicity, richness and variety, hopefulness and divine affirmation, humanization of the divine and also for the use of native imagery and symbols. The relationship between the Supreme Being and the human being is revealed throughout *Gitanjali*. Mr. K. R. S. Iyengar explains *Gitanjali*, as he says:

"The *Gitanjali* songs are mainly the poems of 'Bhakti' in the great Indian tradition. We have Vaishnav poets and Saiva poets who seek God as a child seeks its mother, as a lover seeks his or her beloved. Numerous are these gifted singers — God intoxicated, intoxicated with the love of the Divine, turning his love into the purest poetry. The current coin of India's

devotional poetry is melted and minted anew by Rabindranath, but the pure gold shines as brightly as ever, though the inscription on the coin is in English" (Iyenger, 110)

Rabindranath Tagore's writing is highly imagistic, deeply religious and imbued with his love of nature and his homeland. His poem, 'Where the Mind is Without Fear', included in the volume called *Naibedya*, later published in English 'Gitanjali- 35' is a prayer to a universal father-figure i.e. God to elevate his country into a free land. Here, Tagore defines Freedom as a fundamental system of reasoning, of a sovereign state of mind, established or accepted as a guide for governing the man in a nutshell. Tagore envisions in the future and he extensively writes about his personal, social, cultural and political aspects that prevailed during the British colonization in India.

The first line of the poem, a part of which, is the title itself, holds a very significant meaning. 'Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high'. (Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 36)

'Fear' in this line mentions to the fear that is instilled in the minds of the Indians and also portrays the miserable conditions of the people under the British Rule. The poet envisions India as a country where the people's minds are free from fear and they live a dignified life. He also desires to convey to the people that freedom can be achieved only when our mind is fearless and our head is held high with reverence and pride.

In this line "Where knowledge is free", the poet says that gaining independence would also offer them the freedom to acquire knowledge and be independent which was constrained/restricted during the British rule. (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 36)

"Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls", (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 36)

Here the poet speaks about the various evils that sneaked into the society at that time. The British used the 'divide and rule policy' by creating rivalries among different sections of the society. 'Narrow domestic walls' refers to the walls of religion, race, caste and creed created by the people. It may also refer to the various superstitious beliefs that prevailed in the society during that time.

"Where words come out from the depth of truth",

"Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection", (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 36)

Implies that the poet envisioned his countrymen to live their lives with honesty and utmost truth. Here personification has been used for 'tireless striving'. The poet says that one's goal should be, to attain perfection i.e. to be an ideal country and all those years of struggle would finally reach, its goal of attaining freedom and perfection.

"Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
into the dreary desert sand of dead habit", (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 36)

The poet uses metaphor for reason and habit. He refers to reason as a 'clear stream' that is pure and not contaminated. Here, he is speaking about the thoughts of people which he says

should be clear, noble, honest and free from all sorts of corruption. 'Dreary desert sand of dead habit' also refers to the evils in the society like the superstitious practices that lack logic and reason.

"Where the mind is led forward by thee  
into ever-widening thought and action

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake." (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 36)

In the last three lines the poet prays to the Almighty for his guidance and support to attain independence. The poet wishes his countrymen to be led forward by their noble thoughts and actions. He also refers to freedom as a heavenly place and addresses God as Father, asking him to awaken his people and help them reach that glorious place.

Rabindranath Tagore was saddened by the miserable lives of his countrymen under the British rule and the state of his country in their struggle for independence. In this poem, he shows his love for his country and prays to God to help them attain freedom. The poet envisions India as a country where the people live without any kind of fear or oppression and hold their head high with pride, dignity and self-reliance. He also says that knowledge should be attained without any restriction. There should be no discrimination based on caste, creed, race or religion. India must reach towards its goal of attaining freedom and being an ideal nation. The countrymen must possess noble thoughts and do away with all the superstitious beliefs that defy logic and reason. The poet prays to God, seeking his support and guidance for his countrymen to have noble thoughts and actions. He asks God to awaken them into this heaven like place of an independent nation.

In the poem 'Time is Endless' of *Gitanjali*-82, the poet describes about the endless Time.

Rabindranath Tagore in this poem he speaks about the nature of time. We mortal beings believe that time has certain limitations and we usually feel the need to accomplish a lot before our life comes to an end as we believe that there is time only till, we meet our death. The poet presents the idea that time is endless and is in the hands of the almighty, who is the creator. He further adds that for God there is no limit to time as he has seen centuries pass by and will continue to do so for centuries to come. Time is infinite for the almighty. We mortals seem to be in a hurry to do as much as possible, fearing that we might be late to do certain things and may lose out on certain opportunities. In doing so, we tend to get impatient when we feel like time is running out of our hands and yet there is a lot to achieve. The poet wants to convey that time is divine, yet one must not cling to it. We must value time as it is a precious thing but must also learn to live for the moment. The thoughts of the poet regarding time are observed in the opening lines of the poem:

"Time is endless in thy hands, my lord.

There is none to count thy minutes." (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 70)

The poem begins with the poet addressing the almighty and saying that time is endless in his hands as he is the creator of time. There is no one who can count his minutes as the life of



mortals comes to an end, but time doesn't. The poet says that for God, time is infinite. It has no beginning and no end.

"Days and nights pass and ages bloom and fade like flowers.  
Thou knowest how to wait.

Thy centuries follow each other perfecting a small wild flower." (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 70)

Days and nights pass and time goes on for ages. The poet says that the almighty patiently watches as ages pass by and for him, they're like watching the blooming and withering of flowers. Centuries after centuries follow each other. The metaphor 'wild flower' is used for Centuries passing by i.e. for someone who travels constantly and does not settle at one place. Another metaphor in the poem is 'blooming and fading of flowers' which is used for the passing of ages. The passage of time is being compared to the same as time does not stop at any point and it keeps going on for centuries.

"We have no time to lose,  
and having no time we must scramble for a chance.  
We are too poor to be late." (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 70)

The poet uses a sarcastic tone in the stanza where he says 'we have no time to lose' as he is indicating the impatience of men and is actually speaking about the infinite nature of time. They feel that it is very limited or they are running out of time and they must act quickly in order to not miss out on any opportunities. Men do not want to risk being late in accomplishing things and they usually want to rush through everything, as they feel they have time, only till their life comes to an end.

"And thus it is that time goes by  
while I give it to every querulous man who claims it,  
and thine altar is empty of all offerings to the last." (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 70)

Men keep complaining about the pace at which time keeps passing as they feel it keeps racing ahead. The poet talks about the impatient nature of men. They usually rush through things and forget to value each moment. Time is divine and for God it is infinite.

"At the end of the day I hasten in fear lest thy gate be shut;  
but I find that yet there is time." (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 71)

In the last stanza of the poem, the poet talks about the end of one's life when they feel that their time has come to an end. It is only at the time of death does one realize that even though they may cease to exist, time goes on for ages and it cannot be stopped or held onto. The last line of the poem leaves the reader with a sense of uncertainty, as the poet might hint at the metaphysical aspects of reincarnation. He might also mean that at the end of our lives we find the gates of heaven open for us and we realize that time is divine in nature and will continue to go on. He may also simply mean to say that the doors of God are always open for everyone.

The poet says that time is in the hands of the almighty and is infinite in nature. One cannot count his minutes as time has no beginning and no end. Days and night pass by and so

do ages, just like flowers keep blooming and withering. God has watched all this patiently over centuries and centuries which seem to follow one after the other. Time does not stop at any point. We mortal beings feel the need to rush through things as we feel we have no time to waste and have to accomplish a lot in this one lifetime. We do not want to miss out on opportunities and in our rush, we often forget to value each moment. Men tend to get impatient with time as they feel it keeps passing by and there is a lot one has to do before their life comes to an end. It is only at the time of death that one realizes that time is divine in nature and his existence may come to end but time will continue to go on for ages.

Tagore, in the poem “Thus it is that thy joy in me is so full’ *Gitanjali-63*, celebrates the theme of love. He portrayed himself as a lover and God as his beloved. The poet is contented because God loves him. This is the poet’s love which has forced God, the Almighty to come down to the poet. Further, he says that God’s love would have been of no use if he hadn’t been there. Here the poet hints on the essence of love for both the poet and the God. God too needs man’s love as much as man needs. The poet emphasis on the mutual benefits of love:

Thus it is that thy joy in me is so full. Thus it is that  
thou hast come down to me. O thou lord of all  
heavens, where would be thy love if I were not? (Tagore, *Gitanjali 53*)

Man’s presence is essential for the sake of establishing God’s full glory. That is why God takes joy in the creation of glorious and beautiful forms of life as he has made man as a partner of all the wealth. God’s will be realized only through the man and so the poet is delighted. The poet expresses his delight:

Thou hast taken me as thy partner of all this  
wealth. In my heart is the endless play of thy delight.  
In my life thy will is ever taking shape. (Tagore, *Gitanjali 53*)

The poet says that the God, who is the king of kings, has decorated himself in the beauty in order to captivate man’s heart through his unconditional and selfless love. Further, the poet talks about the divine love and their union is considered as perfect:

And for this, thou who art the King of kings hast  
decked thyself in beauty to captivate my heart. And  
for this thy love loses itself in the love of thy lover,  
and there art thou seen in the perfect union of two. (Tagore, *Gitanjali 53*)

The poem intones the admiration of love, where the lover and the beloved lose themselves in their love. They reach the ecstasy of a perfect union in love. They manifest the power of love that forces God to come down and meet his beloved. The poet maintains that true love can constantly sense the existence of gratification of the Almighty God.



The poem *Gitanjali-103*, "In one salutation to thee" is the last poem of *Gitanjali*. The poet desires to offer everything he has to the almighty God. He surrenders himself, his senses and all his belongings to God. He wishes to bend down minds at God's door with his burden of unshed showers, just like a rain-cloud of July:

In one salutation to thee, my God, let all my senses  
spread out and touch this world at thy feet.

Like a rain-cloud of July hung low with its burden  
of unshed showers let all my mind bend down at thy  
door in one salutation to thee. (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 82)

The poets want all the praises that he has written to the almighty God to flow just as a stream flow into the sea. So that all his songs will unite to form a single stream and will flow into the eternal sea. The poet wants his soul to return back to his Eternal abode which is his original place. He wishes to fly to God, just like the flock of homesick cranes flying day and night to complete their voyage and return to their nests in the mountains. It is that place where the poet says he will attain the eternal peace and ecstasy:

Let all my songs gather together their diverse  
strains into a single current and flow to a sea of  
silence in one salutation to thee.

Like a flock of homesick cranes flying night and  
day back to their mountain nests let all my life take  
its voyage to its eternal home in one salutation to  
thee. (Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 82)

Tagore was a great social and religious reformer, cultural ambassador and a great humanitarian. Poetry had always been a part of spirituality and it has been a source of inspiration to the readers to hope for wellness and better future under the grace of God. In *Gitanjali*, Rabindranath Tagore uses his imagination to express his spiritual truths and protest against the wrongs of the society. It is rightly said by Gallagher, "Imagination is the zone where religious faith and artistic creativity meet". (Gallagher, 26) He uses a lot of water imagery to display how God is omnipresent. S. B. Mukherjee properly noted about Tagore's images in *Gitanjali*: "Here are the images of flashing lights and color carried aloft into the immensity of space". (Mukherjee, 21) Thus, after having the close reading of the poems of Tagore, one can witness the poet's emphasis on the socio-cultural and spiritual aspects in *Gitanjali*. India was facing problems of conflicting confrontation of the social, cultural, religious and political situations during the British colonization. Through *Gitanjali*, Tagore offers us the unique combination of various themes which are necessary to uproot the depressing situations that prevailed in India in the past.



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