



Introduction: Spirituality Beyond Religion

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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 pathmaker is breaking stones.
He is with them in sun and in shower,
and his garment is covered with dust.
Put of thy holy mantle and even like him
come down on the dusty soil!

Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found?
Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him
the bonds of creation;
he is bound with us all for ever.

Come out of thy meditations
and leave aside thy flowers and incense!
What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained?
Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.¹

For this first issue of *Gitanjali & Beyond*, I want to take the journal's title literally and start with "song offerings." *Gitanjali*, Rabindranath Tagore's

¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (London: Macmillan, 1913), no. 13.

Nobel-prize winning work, is a profoundly spiritual book of poems.² In the poem 'Leave This Chanting and Singing', Tagore tells us that we will not find a spiritual life in barren ritualism or in locking ourselves away from the world in the search for God, for *brahman*, or for unity with the All. We can, instead, find it in this-worldly activities, in tilling the hard and dusty soil. 'Deliverance is not for me in renunciation', Tagore writes in another *Gitanjali* poem. Instead of withdrawing from the world, we can only attain freedom 'in a thousand bonds of delight'. Our senses are not merely offering illusions (as most Indian philosophical traditions proclaim), but 'burn into illuminations of joy'. Tagore's spirituality is life-affirming and sensual. It embraces our love for nature and humanity in all its forms, and asks us to participate in life through working for some greater ideals.

Tagore's highest ideal of being is a state of joy and love, which is a feeling we have when we have raised and widened our consciousness to not only include our own self and its concerns but that transcends our self.³

In the world wherever my heart remains indifferent, right from a blade of grass up to a human being, we must realise that our spirituality is limited. When our consciousness, our soul expands to encompass all, then it is by our own quintessence that we apprehend all essences in the world, not by the senses, not by the intelligence, not by scientific logic. That experience of wholeness is an astonishing affair. If I experience profoundly even this tree before me as a manifestation of that essence, my entire being is filled with bliss.⁴

Tagore writes that 'this sense of universality, this all-feeling', is the main aspiration in the philosophy of ancient India, and according to the old texts of the Upanishads, we can reach this goal if we 'feel every creature in the soul and (...) feel our soul in everything'.⁵

² The English book *Gitanjali* consists of Tagore's own translations of 53 of the 157 Bengali poems that he wrote and published in August 1910 and of poems that he had published in other books, amongst others from his drama *Achalayatan* and his poetry collections *Gitimalya*, *Naivedya* and *Kheya*.

³ Tagore gives this ultimate state of unity many different, for example all-consciousness, cosmic consciousness, God consciousness, world-consciousness; all-comprehending love. He also uses the Buddhist term *brahma-vihara*, that is 'the joy of living in Brahma' (Rabindranath Tagore, *Sadhana* [London: Macmillan, 1913], p. 88) or 'to dwell in the constant consciousness of unbounded love' (Rabindranath Tagore, 'Notes and Comments', in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume 3, A Miscellany*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006 [1924], pp. 489-494 [p.492]; and the Sanskrit term *samadhi*, which he translates as 'the complete merging of the self in the infinite' (Tagore, *Religion of Man*, p. 187).

⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Human Values. The Tagorean Panorama. Translations from Santiniketan*. Transl. S. K. Chakraborty & P. Bhattacharya (New Delhi: New Age Intern., 1999, p. 8.

⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Human Values*, p. 288, cf. Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality* (New York: The Macmillan Co, 1917), p. 103.

Even though this implies transcending our narrow self, Tagore does not simply deny or neglect the self. Rather—and in this he differs from most other spiritual approaches—he sees the self as the medium to express ourselves in work, creativity, or love, and to thereby transcend the narrowness of our self.⁶

According to Tagore's experience, the moments when we feel connected often reach us out of the blue (for him, they are frequently connected to being in nature). At the same time, Tagore believes that we need to bring conscious effort to our spiritual development. Yet he also emphasizes, as the poem 'Leave this chanting and singing' already suggests, that there is no direct way that could be prescribed and simply followed like a recipe. We can only attain higher consciousness through 'the inward process of losing ourselves'.⁷ Tagore certainly knows that such an answer is not sufficient to all of those who seek to reach higher spiritual development. He writes to his friend Andrews:

I can guess from your letter that some questions are troubling your mind about the best way of self-realization. There can be no single path for all individuals; for we vastly differ in our natures and habits. But all great masters agree in their teaching on one cardinal point, saying that we must forget our personal self in order to attain our spiritual freedom. Buddha and Christ have both of them said that this self-abnegation is not something which is negative – its positive aspect is love. We can only love that which is profoundly real to us. The larger number of men have the most intense feeling of reality only for themselves; and they can never get out of the limits of their self-love.⁸

Tagore argues that we need to find our own way towards the 'ideal of perfection'.⁹ Yet, as we see in his letter, he considers love to be the golden path, because the very meaning of love is to connect with others and the world and to overcome self-interest.¹⁰ Tagore speaks about two other paths that can potentially lead to universal consciousness. These paths are knowledge and action.¹¹ In *Religion of Man*, he says that 'the largest wealth

⁶ I have discussed Tagore's spirituality in more detail elsewhere, see Christine Kupfer, *Bildung zum Weltmenschen* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014).

⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *Religion of Man* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2006 [1931]), p. 172.

⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Letters to a Friend', in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume 3, A Miscellany*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006 [1928]), pp. 219-322 [p. 253-4].

⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Talks in China', in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume 2, Plays, Stories, Essays*. Ed. Sisir Kumar Das (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996 [1925]), pp. 272-5 [p. 609]

¹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Man', in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume 3, A Miscellany*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006 [1937]), pp. 200-224 [p. 57].

¹¹ cf. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan, 1918), p. 78.

of the human soul has been produced through sympathy and cooperation; through disinterested pursuit of knowledge (...); through service'.¹² However, action, knowledge and love only lead to fulfilment when they are directed towards universal objectives.¹³ 'Our life gains what is called "value" in those of its aspects which represent eternal humanity in knowledge, in sympathy, in deeds, in character and creative works'.¹⁴

In none of these aspects, God necessarily has to play a role (even though God does play an important role for Tagore). This makes Tagore's approach, which has been called 'spiritual humanism', relevant even to the completely secular. Tagore writes that people do not have to believe in God to be spiritual; they only have to believe in humanity.¹⁵ He believes that people who follow sects and are outwardly religious are often less spiritual than those who openly reject religion,¹⁶ and that scepticism can bring us closer to the truth and to love:

The day the cry of scepticism emerges in us as truth, we no longer find solace in sectoral dogma, philosophical argument and scriptural renouncements. That day in a single instant we realize that there is no way out for us but love.¹⁷

Although some of these higher ideals are lofty, Tagore's approach to spirituality is down to earth and this-worldly. Even for those who leave God out of the equation, his definition of spirituality as connection has a lot to offer. Connecting with nature can be a precondition for caring for the environment. Caring for others through political or social actions requires empathy and therefore a connection to others.

The articles and creative contributions to this first issue of *Gitanjali and Beyond* all explore Tagore's concept of spirituality. Some focus on the aspect of knowledge, some on love for humans and nature, some on creative expression. The writers and artists in this volume look at various aspects of Rabindranath's spirituality, assess the global response to his person and ideas and reaffirm the relevance of his ideas in the contemporary world.

The first article is by Ashim Dutta (University of Dhaka/University of York), who explores the transnational aspect of Tagore's spiritual outlook. He shows that Tagore promotes a spirituality that brings together—and goes beyond—both the mystic-religious spirituality of Eastern antiquity

¹² Tagore, *Religion of Man*, p. 35.

¹³ cf. Kakoli Basak, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Humanist* (New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 1991), p. 87.

¹⁴ Tagore, *Religion of Man*, p. 130.

¹⁵ Tagore, 'Letters to a Friend', p. 347; Rabindranath Tagore, 'Ideals of Education', in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume 3, A Miscellany*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006 [1929], pp. 611-614 [p. 621]).

¹⁶ Tagore, 'Letters to a Friend', p. 276.

¹⁷ Tagore, *Human Values*, p. 4.

and the secular liberal humanism of Western modernity. Tagore had been accused of Oriental antiquarianism as he uses terms such as 'East' and 'West' and their Bengali equivalents abundantly. Yet Dutta demonstrates that Tagore used these terms in a less polemical and oppositional way as, for example, Edward Said. Dutta demonstrates that Tagore had a less monolithic view that allowed for mutual appropriation as well as subversion of the different cultural traditions. He emphasized the coexistence of cultural uniqueness and syncretism. In line with this, Tagore synthesised the best of both East and West in his spiritual outlook.

Chi Pham (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences) also discusses Orientalist discourses of the East, with a focus on the connection between different Eastern spiritual traditions. When Tagore visited Cochin in Indio-China (Saigon) in 1929, he emphasized the deep connection between Annamite and Indian spirituality. Pham explores the Vietnamese idea of *câm lặng* (silence) in postcolonial Vietnam, which refers to the ideal of internalized thinking, sorrow and quietness, which the Annamese saw in Tagore and his work and which was central to literary reactions to him. He argues that the Annamite aesthetics of silence was a colonial stereotype that encouraged passivity and the love for 'being voiceless' in the Annamese literary world of the time. This notion was responsible for nationalists to dispense with the spiritual idea, following the French withdrawal from the area, which also led to the neglect of Tagore's legacy in Vietnam.

The global connections between East and West are stressed further in Murdo Macdonald's (University of Dundee) article. He links Tagore's internationalist ideas and cultural practices with those of Patrick Geddes (Scotland), Sister Nivedita (Ireland/India), and Coomaraswamy (Ceylon). Macdonald argues that all four of them were active in education and politics, and that they were driven by a commitment to spirituality and their interest in literature and the visual arts. He connects the four players with others, such as Arthur Geddes, Bose and Okakura, through a philosophical and historical analysis. All of them, Macdonald writes, advocate cross-cultural understanding advocated through education, and all of them are committed to a vision of globalization that goes beyond today's economic use of the term.

Education is also the topic of Christine Kupfer's (Edinburgh Napier University) article, in which she explores how Tagore encouraged spiritual development in children. She makes Tagore's 'atmosphere' essential to the analysis of his educational practices and philosophy. Instead of a focus on content learning, Tagore worked on creating the right conditions for an atmosphere that helped to intensify children's relationship with the world in an unconscious manner. This relationship is central to Tagore's spiritual outlook. Kupfer compares Tagore's notion of atmosphere with recent philosophical and artistic reconceptualizations, such as Sloterdijk's spherologies. She shows how Tagore is ahead of many contemporary reflections on

'atmosphere,' one which is grounded in a fluid relation between object and subject and interior and exterior.

Tom Kane's article adds a futuristic outlook to Tagorean spirituality. After discussing the practical, educational and spiritual connections between Tagore and two of his contemporaries, Jogadish Chandra Bose and Patrick Geddes, Kane proposes a technological twist to Tagore's idea of a 'classroom without walls'. Kane argues that telepresence technologies could be able to add to the continuous evolution of Tagore's educational institutions, as they would help to bring the whole world into one nest, as Visva-Bharati's motto demands, and make sure that there are no walls left that are separating the classroom from the world. Spiritual connections can thus be realized through sympathy, oneness and knowledge-sharing with the world beyond the immediate surroundings.

The paper 'Humanist Spirituality and Poetry: Rabindranath Tagore & George Herbert' by Kitty Scoular Datta demonstrates how Tagore's spirituality develops and how it is progressively revealed in his writings. She shows that his creative writings and spiritual experiences are deeply intertwined, and goes on to compare Tagore's spiritual outlook with George Herbert's. While Herbert was exploring an early modern spiritual stance, Tagore developed a humanistic spirituality that related to the personal, the natural and the social world and that, until today, continues to have the power to challenge religious as well as secular ways of thinking.

Blanka Knotkova's (University of Prague) article interprets gender and spiritual concepts in the translation of Tagore's works into Czech. Knotkova gives us a detailed account of the engagement of Czech scholars with Tagore, particularly regarding his poetry. Acutely aware of the 'male gaze', she specifically explores the meaning and translation of feminine symbols and icons and finds ways that help to avoid gender stereotypes such as female weakness. In relation to spirituality, a gendered reading becomes particularly relevant in relation to God that is gender neutral in Bengali (*devata*). Instead of masculinizing *devata* in keeping with other languages' and beliefs traditions, Knotkova recommends a linguistically looser but semantically more appropriate translation, namely the translation as 'divine voice'.

The paper by Chris Marsh concludes this issue's section of academic articles by showing the relevance of Tagore's spirituality to contemporary problems and challenges in the world today. Marsh focuses on the lectures that Tagore gave on his travels and understands Tagore's spirituality from the perspective of Deep Anthropology, Deep Ecology and Political Theology, which relates to the three main aspect of his spirituality, namely man, nature, and God. Tagore already discussed the ecologically disastrous effects of the machine age and the dehumanising effects of western economic, political and legal systems. Marsh compares Tagore's efforts to change the system with current movements such as the Permaculture and Transition movement, which are all based on community involvement and cooperation, local resilience and sustainability. As Tagore writes,

...we can still cherish the hope, that, when power becomes ashamed to occupy its throne and is ready to make way for love, when the morning comes for cleansing the bloodstained steps of the Nation along the highroad of humanity, we shall ... make the trampled dust of the centuries blessed with fruitfulness.¹⁸

On this hopeful note we end the section of academic articles and go on to the creative writings, on which we are only giving a short overview in this introduction and rather let the works speak for themselves: Debjani Chatterjee's poetry is directly inspired by Tagore, especially his paintings and drawings. Anjana Basu also writes her poetry about a matter close to Tagore's heart, namely the epic narrative Mahabharata with its deep spiritual philosophy. We then move towards Great Britain with poems by Hannah Lavery on Iona and Ronnie Goodyer on 'The Spirit of South East England'. LesleyMay Miller brings both Scotland and India back together in her poetry entitled 'Three Gardens', which is inspired by quotes from Tagore. The next poems, 'Mothers of Manipur' and 'Gandhi' are translations by Jaydeep Sarangi of poetry by Subodh Sarkar. This is followed by another translation, namely the short story 'Punishment' by Rabindranath Tagore himself, translated by Shawkat Hussain. Nigel Planer's contribution is also a direct interpretation of Tagore's work. He gives two extracts of Tagore's plays, *Natir Puja* and *Dak Ghar*, a new form by writing them in iambic pentameters to better capture their spiritual and philosophical implications.

The first two contributions to the fine art section of this journal have links with the creative writing section, as they use words in their art. This is true for LesleyMay Miller, who makes ceramics with quotes from Tagore that are connected to her poetry (also in this issue). Rebeca Gómez Triana's video 'Reading Rain' is a visual poem, filmed in Santiniketan. Santiniketan is also the place that inspired artist Samit Das who is combining archival photos with drawings and thereby offers a dialectic not only between different media but also between past and present and between architecture, nature and people and the place of art in it that can be the foundation for rethinking identity and place.

The final contribution is by David Williams, a photographer whose work is called 'Stillness and Occurrence'. Williams discovered a resonance between his previous work on non-duality and Tagore's writings, whose quotes are coupled with Williams' photographic images.

We are concluding this issue with book reviews on recent books, namely a book on Tagore's paintings by Ursula Bickelmann (reviewed by Elizabeth Ilves), a review of Jaydeep Sarangi's *The Wall and Other Poems* by Bishnupada Ray and a discussion of the edited volume *Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century: Theoretical Renewals* (ed. by Debashish Banerji) by Christine Marsh.

¹⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Nationalism in the West', in *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1917), pp. 1-46 (p.46).

Our first issue of *Gitanjali and Beyond* takes the ‘beyond’ literally. In our discussion of spirituality, we move beyond India and the East-West binary and show the connections between thinkers from different places. We highlight that Tagore’s spirituality lies beyond sectarianism as well as secularism. Tagore’s universalism goes beyond the economic globalisation of greed that we find today, and instead celebrates cultural uniqueness while embracing syncretism.

The authors of this issue are also moving beyond Tagore’s times and look towards the future. They recognize the power of his spiritual vision for us today. They recognize that, to move forward, we need to create an atmosphere that enables us to intensify the connections with the world and to accept responsibility for the creation of a sustainable future.

We have also moved beyond the mere academic discussion of Tagore’s spirituality and have invited artists and writers to contribute, which is a collaboration that Tagore has encouraged himself. In the creative section we read how the spiritual takes on different meanings for the authors, going beyond the traditional devotional expression. It speaks to them through land and through nature, through historical figures, thorough philosophical texts, and even through language. The artworks go even beyond language, speaking to us directly through the eye and our imagination.

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