

ALIENATION AND PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

GAYATRI MITRA

I

The present paper is intended as an essay on the human predicaments as reviewed by Rabindranath Tagore. The title, rather the theme, of the essay is suggested by Robert Blauner's book *Alienation and Freedom*. There is a sense in which the theme looks back to Kant's polarity between *phenomena and noumena* or *nature and freedom*. If alienation is taken to describe the human situation, then it must have been sensed earlier, long before Marx or the existentialists spoke of it. The *Isa Upanisad* (verse 3) speaks of *atmahanojanah*, the people who will kill themselves by alienating themselves from their ontological source. The *Dhammapada* (III.2) speaks of men in the dominion of death as languishing in pain as the fish taken out of water. The *Yoga-Sūtras* suggest that freedom consists in abiding in one's true native *svarupe avasthānām*. These are a few of the instances that go to show how alienation has been a malady of the human situation, entailing loss of selfhood, anxiety, melancholy and boredom. Ever since the Renaissance the symptoms have perpetrated. *The Merchant of Venice* opens with the sentence: "I do not know why I am so sad" As Walter Pater has pointed out, the mother of love in Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" looks forlorn and sad. Such great European poets as Rike and Holderlin have lent expression and voice to the alienated spirit of the European man.

Hegel made alienation an ontological issue, while Marx referred it to the moral failure of capitalism. The faces of alienation are many and diverse. It could be ontological, moral, political, religious and aesthetic. We

should refer to the ontological dimension of alienation in Hegel. But its earliest form could be discerned in Plato, the alienation between the world of real ideas and the world of sensible shadows. Commonsense theory of knowledge alienates the knowing subject from the object of knowledge. For Kant there is the alienation of the constitutive and regulative principles, that of inclination and reason. Colonialism illustrates the political alienation between the colonizer and the colonized. St. Paul's dualism of the carnal and the spiritual epitomizes the alienation between God and man, and it provides the basis of Kierkegaard's religious anxiety. The work of art stands on an altogether different ontological footing from that of its creator.

The paper opens with an introductory note on Tagore's concept of alienation, and enters into a discussion of the concept of alienation itself. Then a synoptic view of the Indian philosophical scenario is undertaken to show that the concept of the particular or the individual is underplayed in the general tenor of Indian philosophical thinkers, be it metaphysics, or grammar or aesthetics. Even the *Viśeṣa* is a category and it behaves as though it was a universal. This fact itself is a distinguishing feature between Indian and Western thought. The latter, from Aristotle to Strawson has always looked for basic particulars. The irreducibility of the individuals or the particulars provides the ground for alienation. The word "alienation" need not always be taken in a pejorative sense. It is a description, but also a value. The road which separates me from my destination also brings me closer to it as well. By traversing the path we realize the destination at every step. This image of the road is from Tagore.

The present paper is undertaken with special reference to Tagore, who operates with the twin polarities of separation (*viraha*) and union (*Milan*). In one of his songs he speaks of building a bridge across the chasm between the two separate individuals. The bridge is the aesthetic analogue of a striving. For Tagore union is the value for overcoming alienation. Or, as he puts it, alienation is the given fact of life while union is the *truth*. The argument is carried on within the framework of a humanistic tradition and the union as value operates ubiquitously both at personal and interpersonal levels. Hence alienation and union, interchangeably called freedom, is a dialectical challenge, and calls for creativity in order to solve it.

Tagore's philosophical thought and ideas have not yet enjoyed public currency, and in that respect they require to be clearly stated and enunciated before they can be philosophically evaluated. Schopenhauer remarks perceptively that the value of the original is ever more than all the critical commentaries. There is then the question of dealing at length with a poet rather than a philosopher. We should remind ourselves the thesis of the vedantic epistemology that *Sruti* is weightier than both perception and inference. Śamkara's commentaries are philosophical achievements of highest order, yet they are but illuminations of the implications of the cryptic aphorisms and high poetry of the *Upaniṣads*. Long before Śamkara's commentaries were written, the verses of the *Upaniṣads* had sustained generation of aspirants in their quest of spiritual truths. Much of Tagore's writings are of that order, they bear unmistakably upon the intimations of immortality. Again, Heidegger does not fight shy of admitting that what he tells us in *Being and Time* are but musings on the poetry of Holderlin. One should be honest in answering the question, which philosopher outstrips Rilke or Holderlin in sheer philosophical depth and probing, if of course we care for solving the riddle of human existence. Holderlin had his Heidegger, but Tagore waits for one, in spite of Radhakrishnan.

II

Our intention thus far has been to consider and explicate some of the cardinal issues of Rabindranath's philosophical position. I have tried to show that he has rethought the whole foundation of our lives and finds its meaning and purpose in human terms alone. This philosophical anthropology is based on a non-naturalistic theory of man. Summarily, the theory of man can be stated in the following manner.

Rabindranath believes that man has a *nature*, and this nature is man's truth. Human truth is *regulative* rather than constitutive of the human mode of being. There is in man a tension between the opening elements of life, ideas, aspirations and actual facts, freedom and necessity, surplus and utility, finitude and infinity, separateness of the ego and the harmony of human relationships. Man finds himself in a crisis, and his humanity consists in the conscious criticism of the crisis. He starts as an ego, but it cannot be the centre of his personality forever, he needs and seeks for a wider life, unity and relationship.

Rabindranath's concept of man has moral and aesthetic overtones. With him the evidence of the aesthetic and the ethical carry greater weight than the logical, philosophy, for Rabindranath brings by taking into account the spirit of alienation, the obscurations of man in the human world. By 'freedom' he understands the perfection of human relationship. Man finds himself in alienation, yet he refuses to be what he is. He searches for his identity. The search may be inconclusive, yet it is a human prerogative, forced upon him by his self-consciousness. Man's refusal to be what he is cannot be a matter of theoretical awareness alone, it entails assent to an imperative concerning the 'real' or 'true' nature of man. Theory of man suggests a course of action. Rabindranath's philosophical writings exhibit such elements as a theory of the nature of man, a diagnosis of what is wrong in man, and a prescription for putting it right.

I have endeavoured to formulate the so-called Indian way of thinking in connection with showing the role of the individual *vis-a-vis* the universal in Rabindranath's philosophical thought. Various influences have been at work in forming his views. He inherits and incorporates a great deal of the Indian way of thinking. This only shows the relation of a philosophy to the culture in which it has grown up. But to say that in Rabindranath's thoughts there is a genuine manifestation of Indian spirit would be an unqualified assertion. One can hardly say that without eliminating from his philosophical outlook a substantial western content. Conscious formulation of theories of man has never been in vogue in the philosophical tradition in India. The so-called Indian theories of man have only been incidental. With Rabindranath it is a primary concern, and should be considered, in part at least, as an inheritance from the positivistic influence of the West. In spite of his own statements about the vedic ancestry of his ideas, his human philosophy is essentially European in spirit. This is a fascinating story of our cultural renaissance.

I should like to make a brief mention of some specific conceptual issues with a view to clarifying finally Rabindranath's philosophical position.

When we consider such statements about man's true or real nature as "Man is an angel of surplus" etc. we must decide what sort of statement is being made. These statements may turn out to be value judgments saying what ought to be the case, rather than statements of facts, about what is

the case. If what is being asserted is evaluative and not factual, then it becomes impervious to evidence. Statements about human nature are especially subject to a kind of ambiguity. When Rabindranath says that man is an artist or a creative spirit, does he mean that all or most of human beings are actually so, or that we should all be so, or what? In this distinguishing value judgements from statements of fact I am not implying that Rabindranath's statements are merely expressions of individual taste, that they cannot be given objectively valid reasons, whether for or against. I am just pointing out that the above kind of clarifying question is often essential when discussing theories of human nature. Rabindranath's statements have often been taken to be ontologically descriptive. But this makes him committed in the wrong direction. He defines his terms persuasively, i.e., he changes the descriptive meaning of his favourite *Upaniṣadic* terms without altering their emotive meaning. Even theological notions undergo a process of secularization at his hands. *Homo homini deus* : for Rabindranath there cannot be any reference point beyond man. This protagorean element in his thought has most often been profaned.

What reason can we give for accepting Rabindranath's statements about man's nature ? Many of them are concealed definitions, and may be held to be impregnable to contrary evidence. They reveal a part of what he means by the word 'man'. Not all matters of definition are trivial, however. Sometimes Rabindranath introduces new terms (e.g. 'angel of surplus') in new ways. It is then indeed necessary for definitions to be given, and for it to be made clear they are not claims about any sort of fact. Definitions are not the sort of statements which can be proved or disproved merely by investigation of the evidence as empirical statements can be. Now, if a statement does not fall into any of the three categories, viz. Evaluative, analytic or empirical, then we have really a difficult case. Some of Rabindranath's assertions about human truth try to say something about what in a sense is the case, and in another sense, what ought to be the case. They assert some fundamental truth about man's nature, and hence are not matters of definition. It is clear, at least, that these assertions are not genuinely empirical.

Rabindranath would not like to win too easily by explaining away all possible evidence against his statements. They are too mixed a bag, and

many deserve individual attention. It is of no use suggesting testability by observation, for it is a criterion not of meaningfulness, but of a statement's being scientific. The emphasis can, of course, be put on falsification. Rabindranath's statements are unfalsifiable, and this is an important fact to establish about them. The criterion of unfalsifiability characterizes the class of statements called 'metaphysical', i.e., statements of the highest generalization. It would be rash to suppose that the metaphysical is coextensive with the ontological, as some of Rabindranath's critics have done. The reasons for accepting his metaphysical statements are to be sought in man's capacity for intuiting truths about himself. These statements have a self-certifying character in speculative philosophy. Rabindranath, in points of facts, has endeavoured to form a coherent system of general ideas in terms of which every element of an experience can be interpreted. With him we are to pursue, in a single hypothesis, the general and the concrete. 'Freedom' is his word for the purpose.

Rabindranath makes some general statements about the human mode of consciousness or imagination. The ability to conceive of what is not the case is the freedom to imagine other possibilities. As men, we can never reach a state in which there are no possibilities unfulfilled for whatever state we are in; we can always conceive of things being otherwise. Rabindranath refers to the human faculty of imagination, a word almost never used in the Indian context. The imagination reveals a new dimension, an ampler ether of significance, meaning and fulfillment. This is his description of the intensionality of human consciousness. There is for Rabindranath a sort of conceptual connection between human freedom and imagination. Man's consciousness, if not unhappy, is creative. Man is an artist who freely fashions his possible image and tries to actualize it. Herein lies man's authenticity. Human reality need not necessarily be what it is but must be able to be what it is not. Rabindranath's basic point is that to be conscious at all is to be free.

Rabindranath gives the impression that the reality value of the ideals of man's further development are ontologically prior to man. This is partly owing to his ambivalent use of language and should be inconsistent with his intention expressed in such assertions as "Reality is human". Man's ideal being must be different from his actual mode of existence since the

ideal can be real for man alone ; hence no ontological priority could be ascribed to it. We do find him in moods such as saying that which is "eternal is realizing itself in history", but such expressions are misleading. The so-called 'eternal' is no other than "man's own infinity", otherwise, Rabindranath says, it would have no justification to exist. To be precise, to exist is to be creative, and accordingly, human existence encompasses the ideal. In a similar fashion his favourite term 'infinite' is a regulative notion, beckoning man's self-transcendence. It is hardly constitutive of human destiny. The term 'infinite' connotes more than it denotes; it is a short hand expression for man's intentional consciousness, his value-positing freedom. There seems to be no reason for supposing that man's self-discovery should culminate in some final event marking the consummation of a hitherto creative process. What Rabindranath means by man's infinity is that no set of predicates, however adequate, can descriptively exhaust what the notion 'man' implies. 'Man' is an open-ended term. His remarkable phrase '*manavik bhuma*' brings out the positivistic presuppositions of his humanism.

Rabindranath does not allow the concept of man to be subsumed under the category of God. In point of fact 'God' is a term he rarely used and even when he uses it, it is rhetorical in effect. Man, he says, aspires for rising in the dignity of being, and religion is only one of the ways in which human aspiration finds itself expressed. In 'religion of man' the idea of God presupposes the idea of man. Had there not been in man a search for his own supreme value, had he not asked the question, 'what is it to be man-like ?' the idea of God as a vision of a being would not have arisen at all. And having arisen, the idea is no definitive answer to the question. Man is greater than his own creations. The concept of man for Rabindranath is a necessary precondition of the idea of God.

I have considered Rabindranath's idea of nature and found that nature, unrelated to the human mind, does not exist in his philosophical discourse. Some remarks concerning the unity of man and nature may now be made. Rabindranath's Berkeleyan-Kantian conception of nature is farthest from Locke and has striking similarities with that of Aristotle. Nature, according to him, occasions our self discovery. "As we know the truth of the stars, we know the great comprehensive mind of man" (*Religion of Man*, p.15). Nature is a human achievement ; it is what is

revealed to man as nature : " It is included in himself and therefore there is a commingling of his mind with it, and in that he finds his own being "(*Religion of Man*, P.72). The unity of man and nature is then possible because unity is a human principle.

Rabindranath assimilated society to nature in respect of man. Society, or for that matter, culture and civilization are human creations. They are organs of man's self-realization. Man creates his society, building his culture and civilization by an inner necessity whereby he can embody his values. Rabindranath uses the same methodological device for explaining the unity of man and society as he does for that of man and nature. Society, conceived along the premises of Rabindranath's concept of man, cannot be a system of windowless monads interacting by a pre-established harmony. The generative principle for harmony should lie within the social individuals. Thus envisaged, Rabindranath's society is as distant from Rabindranath's as it is from that of Hobbes. It cannot be modeled on the bee-hive (*Religion of Man*, p.22) either. Short of freedom or harmony, a society becomes closed, and its members alienated.

How can the truth of general propositions about man be ascertained? Aeschelus, in speaking of the office of intuition, says that when the mind sleeps it is bright with eyes. with Rabindranath the relationship between intellect and intuition is not one of war with the knife. Man is a unity of intellect, emotion and will. Since man is a unity of the three, these elements need not conflict with each other, and a *fortiori* no one of them be complete without gathering into itself the other two. There should be no divorce between intellect and intuition. "The understanding mind of man", says Rabindranath, "comprehends both the reasoning mind and the creative imagination". His word for intuition is 'imagination'. It is very much like Kant's notion of reflective judgment, except perhaps in the fact that it is endowed with a poetic quality. "The details of reality must be studied in their differences by science, but it can never know the character of the grand unity of relationship pervading it, which can only be realized immediately by the human spirit" (*Religion of Man*, pp.63-4). If it be possible to put our thrust in the mind in one of its functions, it should not be wrong to trust it in another of its capacities .

It is not enough for Rabindranath, to assent intellectually to a theory of man; it must be held with a certain intensity and depth of feeling. Unless the theory is distilled from life, if it is obly argued about it would remain merely abstract and conceptual. This explains the primacy of the aesthetic in Rabindranath's philosophy. Art is essentially *Sahitya*, which etymologically suggests *Sahitvatva* or communication. It overlaps with the domain of the moral. The same spiritual plenitude, man's will to communicate accounts for both beauty and goodness. As a creator of beauty man builds bridges between the self and the not-self. Art is a pathway to freedom; it frees us by disengaging the mind from its imprisonment in the web of customary associations and routine ideas. An aesthetic view of life not only rescues morality from stagnation but also is presupposed by it. Man's self-expression in art is its own object and helps him to leap free of the filters that obscure his real nature. Man *qua* man is an artist, a citizen of the kingdom of freedom. What practical reason is for Kant, art is for Rabindranath. It implies a non-solipsistic human world and transcendence of alienation. The word 'love' sums up all these.

"Goodness is the freedom of our self in the world of man, as is love" (*Religion of Man*, p.121). It may be debated whether 'love' is an aesthetic or ethical notion. For Rabindranath it is both. Love illuminates our consciousness and beauty bears its everlasting meaning. The notions of beauty, goodness and love are revelatory of the human message of our experience. 'Freedom', 'harmony' and 'surplus', are interchangeable terms, are key-notions in Rabindranath's philosophical anthropology. Whatever term is predictable of man must be either derivable from or definable in terms of these. This is a point of methodological significance. Working through the imagination, the surplus in man renders possible a plethora of man's adventure of ideas and actions. It "finds its manifestation in science, philosophy and the arts, in social ethics, in all things that carry their ultimate value in themselves" (*Religion of Man*, pp.36-7). Against the claim of every abstract ideas Rabindranath has pleaded the cause of the complete man. This continues to be a desideratum of any theory of man. "The history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationship" (*Religion of Man*, p.116).

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Tagore Rabindranath :

- *Sadhana, Personality*, 1961 editions of Macmillan India.
- *Creative Unity*, 1962 editions of Macmillan India.
- *Man, Kitabistan*, Allahabad, 1961.
- *The Religion of Man*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1961.
- *Collected Poems and Plays*, Macmillan, London, 1961.
- *Lectures and Addresses*, Ed. Anthony X. Soares, Macmillan India, 1960.
- *Angel of Surplus*, Ed. Sisir Kumar Ghosh, Viswa Bharati, Calcutta, 1978.
- *On Art and Aesthetics*, Ed. Prithwish Neogy, Orient Longmans, Calcutta, 1961.
- *English works of Rabindra Nath Tagore*, Ed. Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Akademy, New Delhi, 2 vols, 1998.
- *Selected Poems*, Trans. William Radice, Penguin Modern Classics, Penguin Books, Middlesex, England, 1987.
- *Rabindra Rachanavali* (Collected works in Bengali), Visva Bharati, 26 vols, Calcutta, Various Prints and Editions.

GENERAL WORKS

- Aurobindo, Sri. : *The Life Divine*, Shri Aurobindo Library, Greystone Press, New York, 1949.
- *The Cycle of Society*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1951.
- Ayer, A.J. : *The Problem of Knowledge*, London Penguin Books, 1956
- Bhattacharya
Krishnachandra : *Studies in Philosophy*, Progressive Publishers, Calcutta, 1956.
- Blauert, Robert : *Alienation and Freedom*, London, University of Chicago Press, 1964.

- Camus, Albert : *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Trans. S. Gilbert, New York, 1946.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig : *The Essence of Christianity*, Trans. George Eliot, London, Harper & Row, 1954.
- Fromm, Erich : *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*, New York, Pocket Books, 1962.
- *Escape from Freedom*, New York, Avon Books, 1941.
- *Marx's Concept of Man*, New York, 1961.
- Feuer, Lewis : "What is Alienation ? The Career of a Concept". *New Politics*, Vol. 1, no.3, pp.116-34, 1962.
- Gandhi, M.K. : *Selection from Gandhi*, Ed. N.K. Bose, Ahmedabad, 1950.
- Hegel, G.W.F. : *Phenomenology of Mind*, Trans. J.B. Baillie, New York, Macmillan, 1949.
- *Reason in History*, Trans. R.S. Hartman, New York, Liberal Arts, 1953.
- *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Trans. E.S. Haldane and F.H. Simson, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963.
- Hook Sidney : *From Hegel to Marx*, Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1962.
- Horton John : "The Dehumanization of Anomic and Alienation : A problem in the Ideology of Sociology. *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XV, No. 4, 1964."
- Jaspers, Kari : *Philosophy*, Vol. II, Routh ADGE, London, 1956.
- Kaufmann, Walte : *Hegel- Reinterpretation, Text and Commentary*, Weidenfield, & Nicholson, 1965.
- Kaufmann, Arnolds : "On Alienation", *Inquiry*, Vol.8, No.2, 1965.
- Marx Karl : *Early Writings*, Ed. & Trans. T.B. Bottomore, London, C.A. Watts, 1963.
- Nakamura, Hajime : *Ways of Indian Thought*, Hawali University Press, 1964.
- Radhakrishnan and Charles Moor : *Source Book of Indian Philosophy*, Princeton

- University Press, 1957.
- Sartre, J.P. : "Existentialism is a Humanism" in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Ed. Walter, Kautmann, New York, Meriden Books, 1956.
- *The Problem of Method*
 - *Being and Nothingness*, Trans, Hegel Barnes, London, Methnen, 1956.
- Tucker, Robert C. : *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, Cambridge University Press, 1964.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig : *Philosophical Investigations*, Trans, G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1953.
- Warnock, Mary : *Philosophy of Sartre*, The London, Hutchinsom, 1965.