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**RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S HUMANISM THROUGH INTERPERSONAL  
RELATIONSHIPS**

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**Introduction:**

Rabindranath Tagore played a very significant role to promote humanism in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are many factors that shaped his personality and the ideals of humanism. Tagore humanism is mainly expressed through his concept of inter-personal relationship. The philosophy of humanism as developed by Tagore is universal, because it deals with the analysis of the universal nature and creative existence of man. Rabindranath Tagore's Philosophy of humanism can be studied in the light of his basic concept like Surplus in Man, concept of freedom and religion of man. Rabindranath Tagore is distinguished for being a man with numerous dimensional personalities and is the most eminent Bengali renaissance poet, philosopher, essayist, critic, composer and educator who dreamt of a harmony of universal humanity among the people of different origin through freedom of mind and spiritual sovereignty. Rabindranath Tagore occupies a fore position in the galaxy of the prophets of Humanism. He became the first ever Asian writer to be awarded a Noble Prize in 1913 for translated version of his cycle of song poems entitled Gitanjali. Radhakrishnan aptly remarks that, "In interpreting the philosophy and message of Sir Rabindranath Tagore, we are interpreting the Indian ideal of philosophy, religion, and art, of which his work is the outcome and expression."<sup>1</sup> He is a multi-dimensional personality and the underlying theme of his creations is love for man. The outward life of Tagore was not very eventual concept the Noble Prize and the founding of the 'Santiniketans' but he was mainly a man of the world of songs and literature. His life itself was a philosophy, though he was not a philosopher in systematic meaning of the terms. Tagore humanism is mainly expressed through his concept of interpersonal relationship. He has reflected comprehensively and intensely on the ontological status of man in idiosyncratic dimensions and the revelation of the meaning in relation to nature and to modes of inter personal relationship. It is said that the Philosophy of Humanism is a product of

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<sup>1</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1919), preface vii.

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Renaissance in Western Europe. Although the inner essence of the Humanism in the East, it is found that it puts much emphasis upon the mental existence of man expressing his mental and spiritual freedom. In this paper I shall discuss the Humanistic Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore and its importance in modern society, which is largely expressed through the concept of interpersonal relationship.

**Man and Nature Relationship:**

According to Tagore there are essentially two senses in which we can think of our relationship with nature- one in which we ordinarily treat it as an unconscious objective mode for information, binding down man to the physical and essential needs; and the other in which it satisfies our personality with expression that make our life rich and stimulate our imagination in their harmony of, colours, forms, sounds and movements. He argues that we are face to face with this world and our relations with nature are manifold. We always come in touch with Nature to fulfill our needs. With nature Man has a very good communication.

Nature helps man to develop his personality as much as man helps nature to reveals its beauty. Man grows along with nature in so far as he can identify himself with nature, and makes it his messenger of communication. With the help of nature man creates his own nature, beauty, and art. In his creativity and self-expression, man becomes conscious about his diversity, his capability to go beyond his physical finitude and through creation of art, strives to send his communication to the Supreme Person who reveals himself to him. As a form of communication inter-relation between man and nature has two levels—one is cognitive and the other is existential. At the cognitive level, nature contributes to knowledge not as an externality but as expressed to man.

Tagore writes, “All our knowledge of things knows them in their relation to the Universe, in that relation which is truth.” But man due to his day today activities, forgets that nature is his. It is not because that the nature has grown out of touch with us, rather, we do not perceive nature in its aspect of unity; we are driven to destruction by our focus on the fragmentary. He laments that, “we grow out of touch with this great truth, we forget to accept its invitation and its hospitality, when in quest of external success our works become unspiritual and unexpressive.” Tagore also quotes here Wordsworth’s line: The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers. Little we see in Nature that is ours.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Creative Unity*, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. 2, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008), 496.

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According to Tagore the unity of man and nature has its source in the One or the Absolute. The self and nature are the twin aspects of the Absolute. It is in man's consciousness of a deeper unity with nature, with the universe, and ultimately with the Supreme Person who has created this universe for man. Tagore comments: When a man does not realize his kinship with the world, he lives in a prison-house whose walls are alien to him. When he meets the eternal spirit in all objects, Then is he emancipated for then he discovers the fullest significance of the world into which he is born; then he finds himself in perfect truth, and his harmony with the all is established<sup>3</sup>. Both man and nature are equally important for Tagore. But man is not satisfied with what he is. He has a desire to transcend his own limitation and ultimately he wants to reach a point where one is identical with oneself (I=I), and nature who helps man to realize this goal. Man carries within himself the beauty of nature and an urge to transcend one's festivity to reaches the Absolute. Tagore says that man works like a bridge between two poles. He remarks: At one pole of my being I am one with stock and stones. There I have to acknowledge the rule of universal law. That is where the foundation of my existence lies, deep down below....But at the other pole of my being I am separate from all. There I have broken through the cordon of equality and stand alone as an individual. I am absolutely unique, I am I, I am incomparable.<sup>4</sup>

According to Tagore, man's individuality and creativity go together. Man comes out of his boundary of physical needs and moves forward to realize the Infinite run on two parallel lines that of utility and of self-expression. Sartre say's: 'Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus self-surpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and centre of his transcendence. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity'.<sup>5</sup>

The creation of art, music, painting and dance uplift man from a mere being to a *personal man*. The personality of man, according to Tagore, is "conscious of its inexhaustible abundance; it has the paradox in it that it is more than itself; it is more than as it is seen, as it is known, as it is used. And this consciousness of the infinite, in the personal man, ever strives to make its expressions immortal and to make the whole world its own"<sup>6</sup>. Sartrean notion of 'man is not what he is, man is what he is not' echoes in the writings of Tagore, when he says, "...man has a feeling that he is truly represented in something

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<sup>3</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Sādhanā*, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 2

<sup>4</sup> Tagore, *Sādhanā*, 306

<sup>5</sup> Jean- Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet, (London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1948), 55

<sup>6</sup> Tagore, *Personality*, 362

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which exceeds himself. He is aware that he is not imperfect, but incomplete.”<sup>7</sup>, According to Tagore, the personal man is the highest man, the Eternal man, the Complete man in this realization of the unity of beauty, truth and goodness. There is an inter-relation between the world in which we live and the personality of man. In fact, this world is essential for the development of the personality of man. In his words, “with our love and hatred, pleasure and pain, fear and wonder, continually working upon it, this world becomes a part of our personality....If this world were taken away, our personality would lose all its content.”<sup>8</sup>

**Inter-personal Relationship (I and Thou)**

This part, I shall show the ontological aspects of the ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ relationship in Tagore’s humanistic thoughts. Tagore’s humanism is called the *Religion of Man*. But the term, ‘Religion’, does not suggest that man is under the control of a spiritual and infinite being like God. Tagore explained religion in the following words:

To me religion is too concrete a thing, though I have no right to speak about it. But if ever I have somehow come to realize God, or if the vision of God has ever been granted to me, I must have received the vision through this world, through men, through trees and birds and beasts, the dust and the soil.<sup>9</sup>

The reality of the Supreme Person is as much dependent upon the individual being as the latter is dependent upon the former. In this sense, God also be a personal being like man. The *Vedāntic* view of divinity in man—*Nara-Nārāyana*, is developed in Tagore’s philosophy of the Religion of Man, avoiding the formal religions with their rituals, superstitions and mythologies. God is there in every life (*Jivan Devatā*), and the realization of god through knowledge or intuition is the essence of religion. According to Tagore God is not to be found in temples or mosques but in humanity itself. Tagore’s idea of humanism is basically to the service of mankind. He writes in *Gītānjali*:

“Deliverance is not for me in renunciation.

I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.

Thou ever poorest for me the first draught of thy wine of various colours and fragrance,

Filling the earthen vessel to the brim.

My world will light its hundred different lamps with thy flame and place them before  
the altar Of thy temple”.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, 106

<sup>8</sup> Tagore, *Personality*, 353.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, “Most Dear to All the Muses,” xix

<sup>10</sup> Tagore, *Gītānjali*, 73

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According to Tagore, the perception of our relationship with *all* through the union with the divine is the ultimate end and fulfillment of humanity. So that, the spirit of One in God has the many for the realization of the unity and the truth behind this spiritual union is love. He thinks that man is above all a lover, his freedom and fulfillment is in love, which is another name for perfect realization. Through the love, human society is for best expression of man, and that expression, according to its perfection, leads him to the full realization of the divine in humanity. Tagore says: In love the sense of difference is obliterated and the human soul fulfils its purpose in perfection, transcending the limits of itself and reaching across the threshold of the infinite. Therefore love is the highest bliss that man can attain to, for through it alone he truly knows that he is more than himself, and that he is at one with the All.<sup>11</sup>

This is the ultimate end of man: to find the *One* which is in him, which is his truth, which is his soul; the key which opens the gate of the spiritual life, the heavenly kingdom. But that *One* in us is always seeking for unity—unity in knowledge, unity in love, unity in purpose of will; its highest joy is when it reaches the infinite one within its eternal unity.<sup>12</sup>

Tagore equates love with truth and truth with beauty. He argues that it is only when one can detach from the narrow boundaries of selfishness, can one have a true vision of the beauty, which is omnipresent and realize its everlasting relation with truth. In his opinion, “this is the ultimate object of our existence, that we must ever know that ‘beauty is truth, truth beauty;’ we must realize the whole world in love, for loves gives its birth, sustains it, and takes it back to the bosom.”<sup>13</sup> According to Tagore, “when our universe is in harmony with Man, the eternal, we know it as truth, we feel it as beauty.”<sup>14</sup> Also, according to Tagore, truth and beauty are also dependent upon man. He points out, “beauty is in the ideal of perfect harmony which is in the Universal Being; and truth is the perfect comprehension of the Universal Mind. We individuals approach it...through our accumulated experience, through our illumined consciousness...”<sup>15</sup>

Tagore believes in the *Gitā*'s concept of freedom; true freedom is not the freedom *from* action but freedom *in* action.<sup>16</sup> Tagore says that there may be two types of freedom — outer and inner, outer

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<sup>11</sup> Tagore, *Sādhanā*, 291.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 295

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 295

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from “Conversations and Interviews: Einstein and Tagore,” in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das, (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008), 911.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 912

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freedom is the freedom from the guidance of pleasure and pain, and inner freedom is from the narrowness of self desire.<sup>16</sup>

We have our own freedom of will, which can only find its true meaning in relation to the freedom of other wills. The more our will is freed and widened, the stronger our relationship with the universal world of reason. This is the bond of union through where man is related to the world and he feels an exceeding joy through this communion.

Radhakrishnan mentioned, “to Rabindranath God is not a being seated high up in the heavens, but a spirit immanent in the whole universe of persons and things.”<sup>17</sup> The idea of all-omnipresent essence or the absolute and its realization will not be possible, if the faculty of reason has no control over our mind, which is liable to be stultified by fear, superstition, false prejudices and dogmas. Tagore says in *Gītānjali*:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit; where  
the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action...<sup>18</sup>

The spiritual bond between the personal man and the universal world of reason ensure our integration in the national sphere and paves the way for international amity. According to him, human civilization can best be understood through our loving concern for mankind. He says that, “...we never can have a true view of man unless we have a love for him. Civilisation must be judged and prized, not by the amount of power it has developed, but by how much it has evolved and given expression to, by its laws and institutions, the love of humanity.”<sup>19</sup> Tagore works for one supreme cause, the union of all sections of humanity in sympathy and understanding, in truth and love.

**Conclusion:**

Here I would like to highlight the role of language in human ontology, and Tagore’s humanism vis-à-vis inter-personal relationship of *I and thou* that takes the form of intra-personal relationship of *I am thou*. I shall explain them below—

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<sup>16</sup> Tagore, *Personality*, 379

<sup>17</sup> Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, 54

<sup>18</sup> Tagore, *Gītānjali*, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Tagore, *Sādhanā*, 323

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Language plays an important role in human ontology. Tagore's view of language is ontological, because, human ontology determines the nature of language. Man expresses himself through his creativity, and language is one of the vital modes of communication of man's self-revealing activity.

Man is an expressive being, so that, he is capable to achieving self clarity and freedom. Freedom is integral to a self-realizing subject. As Charles Taylor says, "The realization of man...involved an expression, in the sense of a clarification, of what he is; and this is why the highest fulfillment comes in expressive activity<sup>20</sup>."

Now, the use of language can help us to understand Tagore's notion of the inter-personal relationship, because he distinguishes between experiences as such, and one's consciousness of experience. In art, it is not the experience itself that the artist expresses, but his personality, his own consciousness of the experience. According to Tagore, self-expression is the important to communication. As an expressive being, man recovers communion with the universe. It is in man's consciousness of a deeper unity with nature, with the world, of which we are a part. The self-expressive being (I) is in interchange with the greater nature.

Moreover, our communion with nature also entails our relation with the 'other'. The self-expressive being carries an eternal relation with the other, and the other also dependent upon my existence. This way, there arises an interpersonal relationship between 'myself' and the 'other' (*I and thou*).

But at the deeper ontological level, this inter-personal relation of *I and thou* takes the form of intra-personal level of human existence (*I am thou*). I am dependent upon other and the other is a condition for my union with the all pervading spirit. Tagore thinks that to attain our world-consciousness, we have to unite our feelings with this all-pervasive infinite feeling, and this is possible when we free ourselves from the bonds of personal desires, prepare ourselves for our social obligations and sharing the burdens of our fellow beings. Thus, *I and thou* work for a common cause to achieve the unity of consciousness. He says that to be truly united in knowledge, love and service with all beings, and thus to realize one's self in the all-pervading God is the essence of goodness, and it is also the key that opens the gate of the spiritual life, the heavenly kingdom, or as Kant would have it: *founding of a kingdom of God on Earth*.

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 21.

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