

TAGORE'S CONCEPT OF MUSIC

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What did Tagore mean by 'music? The answers which he himself attempted on different occasions to this question were seemingly so contradictory and sometimes even so self-negatory that no well rounded definition of 'music' had ever emerged. Tagore once stated that 'music is simply a means to express thought, just as literature is'.¹ On another occasion he opined, "music is as much a means to express one's emotion as it is to rouse emotion in others."² Again, while conversing with Romain Roland he stated, "The purpose of art is not to give expression to emotion but to use it for the creation of significant form... Emotion only supplies the occasion which makes it possible to bring forth the creative act... In European music I find, however, that an attempt is sometimes made to give expression to particular emotions. Is this desirable? Should not music also use emotion as material only, and not as an end in itself?"³ The analysis of the statements mentioned above led us inevitably to the formulation of the following three propositions :

- (a) Music is expression,
- (b) Music is expression and affect arousing stimulus,
- (c) Music is expressive symbol,

In view of the apparent distinctness of these three propositions, it will be our effort to analyse them critically, and find out a coherent pattern, if any.

The project, we propose to undertake, presupposes that after examining the different segments of the above statements made by

Tagore, we strive to identify their conflict and the possible nature of their resolution.

II

(a) To begin with, we intend to inquire first, what exactly did he mean by the statement "music is expression". By 'expression' he obviously meant the expression of emotion. But just using the word 'emotion' does not solve all our problems. Since, we are susceptible to various types of emotions, it transpires that we must make sure if he meant by 'emotion' all 'emotions', or a few species of the genre 'emotion'. Some emotions, we know, are very trivial, and, as a matter of fact, impermanent. There are others which by themselves do not stimulate sentiments, but with the help of other emotions can arouse sentiments which crave for psychical or behavioural expression. And there is also a third category, consisting of the permanent emotions, which do not change their character, in any situation either, prohibitory or explicatory. They are easily identifiable.⁴ Now, which of these three categories of 'emotion' did Tagore strive to express in 'Music'?

If we scrutinise Tagore's writings on music and his innumerable compositions we can logically assert that Tagore, by 'emotion' vis-a-vis 'music', meant a particular category of emotion instead of and different from all other categories of 'emotions'. When Tagore expressed the view that 'music is the objectification of emotion', he, as far as we could guess, meant emotions of the third category i.e., 'emotions' of everlasting character.⁵ A few examples here will substantiate our view. When, for instance, he stated that '*Bhauravi* expresses the eternal quietude of nature',⁶ and similarly, when he explained the meaning of other classical Indian *Ragas* in his inimitable language with reference to the motif of 'pathos' in nature, we could not but conclude that Tagore accepted the motifs of 'quietude' or 'pathos' as the expressive symbols of aesthetic feeling. Thus by virtue of his selecting the above two states of mind (two permanent emotions) he selected permanent, or immutable emotions, instead of a transitory one, as the subject of music. Since, he maintained that 'music' gave expression to the music-image of the throb of the inner and universal life which was not cognisable, it showed that Tagore definitely meant the permanent emotions only.

This is so much for 'emotion'. But what he meant by 'expression' is as much a conjecture. There are four different conjectures that his use of the word 'expression' may lead to viz.,

- (a) Is 'expression' an objectification of emotion?
- (b) Does 'expression' mean the objectification of the form of emotion?

- (c) Does 'expression' mean the discovery of one's unrecognisable feeling ??.
- (d) Or, did he mean anything different, i.e., by 'expression' meaning the objectification in music-image of the isomorphic aspect of emotion instead of the concrete expression of emotion?

In order to resolve the dispute, it may be mentioned that, when Tagore says 'expression', he means a reaction of mind to the external stimuli. The intent, obviously, is the realisation and expression of the truth in Nature, in lieu of giving expression to the profane sentiments of love, hope and frustration. The expressive symbol, he argues, does not, at any rate, imitate the externals of the stimuli but concretizes the inner meaning⁸. For instance, the *raga Bhairavi*, according to him, does not represent the externals of the sound, or quietude of morning but the immutable character of all mornings, (i.e., the freshness, the solitude, the promise); and hence, bears no resemblance to the sensuous aspect of morning. *Raga Sahana*, to quote Tagore again, has the inner significance of having expressed the fundamentals of creation rather than presenting the love, joy and fulfilment in marriage⁹. Thus Tagore wanted to establish the thesis that (a) the external similitude between music and sentiment was not a necessary condition of music; and that (b) the isomorphic aspect of music was not universally anthropomorphic. Thus a clear analysis reveals, that by 'expression', Tagore, purports to express in music-image the fundamental rhythm of life and nature through the commonplace modes of stimuli. Although, the origin of 'music' is anthromorphic, but its expression may be iconic or otherwise.

(b) The second proposition that 'music is expression and affect arousing stimulus', as we have stated at the outset, is still more complex. The character of music, Tagore understands, does not reveal itself fully in giving expression to an emotion only, but it strives to be something more. What is that something more? What, then, is the necessary condition of music? Tagore answers that in music, a necessary condition, if there is any at all, consists of that particular aspect of music which stimulates in the mind of the listener, while engaged in the act of listening, the feeling which music tends to express. i.e., 'music' in order to become 'music' must, of necessity, fulfil the condition of rousing affects in the mind of the listener. In as much as, it is itself an expression of an affect roused by some other music or external non-musical stimulus.

This statement of his, if it is true, necessarily leads us to inquire into the relation of music with affect and stimulus. Should music.

to become music, rouse affects already acquired but latent; or rouse fresh affects of which the listener has neither any inheritance nor experience? What is the ultimate effect of the percussive sound on human mind? Does it lead to arousing of affects which at last end in inhibition, or does it rouse affects which lead to expression, and consequently to relief and alleviation of a man? To these questions he did not make any clear answer indicating this, that or the other. But we guess, he has visualized something different in the relation of music with human mind than what is ordinarily presumed.

If we take to evaluating the basic ingredient of his statement that 'music is expression and affect arousing stimulus', we can clearly discuss that Tagore, by 'affect arousing stimulus', does not definitely mean 'inhibitions' and their permanent blockade which ultimately lead to oppression. He obviously means by 'music' an expression of affects which we neither inherited nor experienced, but it existed as an external element. As an element again, it is not taken to be an autonomous entity, for Tagore considered it to be immanent in the rhythm of the cosmic play of creation and destruction. Whatever else does it mean, 'affect' here does not definitely mean an after effect of the inhibition of tendencies of response to stimuli¹⁰. In all that is understood by inhibition of acquired patterns of expectations in music, the term 'affect, cannot be included in any way. It, on the contrary, connotes some unrecognised emotions implicit in nature. So Music because of its virtue of rousing affects and helping in identification of emotions, is considered to be a system of knowledge. Music thus in addition to rousing the common emotions rouses such emotions as were neither felt nor inherited. And through the identification of these emotions music helps us to cognise the rhythm of life its harmony and cadence, which are not cognisable to human senses in an ordinary way. So music rouses inhibitions in the sense that it stimulates those emotions of which we have no prior knowledge, but once born, they eventually nurture desires and expectations of expression.

The act of rousing affect and the act of expression, Tagore presumes, operate simultaneously without any difficulty; because these two aspects together constitute the necessary condition of music. We call it a necessary condition, because the term music presupposes the act of expression of affects. When the existence of A presupposes the act B, the relation between A and B is determined by B being accepted as the necessary condition of A. So, when Tagore so emphatically asserted that 'music is expression and affect arousing stimulus', he obviously meant the act of stimulating affect and its expression as a necessary condition of music. If, music as Tagore

contends in many of his utterances, fails to stimulate inhibitions which help us in identifying the emotion and its meaning that music tends to convey 'music', at all events, might have missed much of its significance.

(c) Let us now explain the third important proposition that 'music is significant form'. Tagore has made the statement under review in the year 1926 when he met Romain Roland. After a survey of all his statements is made we can conclude that Tagore, in all likelihood, regarded music as the most efficient means of communication. When he maintains that music is an efficient means of communication, he obviously does not mean that music is a discursive symbol. He presupposes, that music possesses a 'presentational' character by virtue of which it becomes an articulate form. The unity of the form, we guess, is its efficient communicability. The mediums of expression, we all know, are far too many, viz. music, language, painting, sculpture. But that music is the most capable of them, is because of the fact that it is genetically related to the rhythm of our organism. It is a communion with the life process, Tagore assumes, which makes of it such an efficient tool of expression. Tagore stated, "The starting point for all arts, poetry, painting or music, is the breath, the rhythm which is inherent in the human body and which is the same every where and is therefore universal. I believe musicians must often be inspired by the rhythm of the circulation of blood or breath"¹¹. We can compare it with an analogous passage from Langer. "The essence of all compositions—tonal or atonal, vocal or instrumental, even purely percussive, if you will—is the semblance of organic movement, the illusion of an indivisible whole. Vital organisation is the frame of all feeling, because feeling exists only in living organisms; and the logic of all symbols that can express feeling is the logic of organic process. The most characteristic principle of vital activity is rhythm. All life is rhythmic; under difficult circumstances, its rhythm may become very complex, but when they are really lost life can not endure. This rhythmic character of organisms permeates music, because it is a symbolic presentation of the highest organic response, the emotional life of human beings."¹².

Since, music is an articulate form, it is a symbol as it is capable of expressing the form of feeling, the feeling of birth, growth, decay of an organism and the throb of inner life. Music not only transforms into audible patterns whatever we can feel and visualize, but even through symbol whatever we can intuit but can neither feel nor perceive. It is a symbol by virtue of its being fit to represent the structure of the most complex of feelings in music terminology, which otherwise, could not have been possible. When Tagore states

that pure music is abstract music he precisely means that the 'abstract of feeling' and the 'the abstract of music' some where had a formal congruence.

Thus when Tagore states that the function of music, by any means, is not to express what we feel but to create the 'significant form' ¹³, he wants to explain that the content of music is not 'meaning' but 'import' which is the pattern of the sentence instead of translating faithfully into sound pattern the feeling itself. This idea of Tagore can most fittingly be explained with reference to Langer again, who said, "That music is a significant form and its significance is that of a symbol, a highly articulated sensuous object which by virtue of its dynamic structure can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey" ¹⁴. This is probably why Tagore thought of music as 'significant form'.

III

We have explained separately the import of the three conjectures of Tagore viz., (a) that music is expression (b) that music is expression and affect arousing stimulus and (c) that music is an expressive symbol. Now we can possibly undertake the task of examining the areas where the three conjectures have converged, and very truly reveal their innate similarity.

When the first indicates that music expresses in music image the lasting emotions, the second indicates the expression of the form of feeling and stimulation of affect which in turn gets expressed in another music image and the third that, music expresses the formal structure of feeling through a music structure, there are of course quite a good deal of differences. But they also indicate both individually and collectively that, music is 'articulate, form,' since it communicates through symbol i.e., music-image. So far as conjectures (a) and (c) are concerned, the difference does not appear to us to be of much significance, for a 'significant form', as such, connotes 'expression', 'communication', etc., to become form. It is, in fact, nothing but a different way of stating that music means expression. Ever since it is proved that music is a symbol it has also followed that its import of articulation of feeling is always a logical expression. That is, it expresses the abstract of feeling in an expressive music-image in place of exactly imitating feeling in sound. So the two conjectures are basically one. The first indicates its communicability, and the third indicates the logic of communication; the only difference is that the first conjecture does but include only the vital emotions.

If there is any dispute, it is with regard to the second conjecture which means by music something more than mere expression of emotions. For, music here along with the act of expression also activates emotion, either by waking up the latent inhibitions, or by regenerating new ones. When Tagore emphasised this act of music, he somehow deviated from his basic stand that 'music is expression', and he plucked up a dispute. To formulate a comprehensive idea of Tagore's concept of music this dispute, of necessity, must be resolved.

The affects arise because the emotions we are born with or we receive through our experience are either oppressed or permanently arrested. The inhibitions originate from various sources, that is, from the organism or from the stimuli received from the musical and non-musical experiences. If our desires are suppressed because of unfavourable circumstances inhibition occurs. That the rise of inhibitions following upon the suppression of desires and expectations does take place, is because of the following four factors : (I) the inhibitions are of indefinite nature, (II) they are sometimes conflicting or self-negatory in character, (III) their unfavourable social situations and (IV) indeterminate nature of the situations. In a state of innumerable inhibitions resulting from our susceptibilities to equally countless desires and expectations affects may arise. So, in such a state of constant oppression and tension, it is always our desire to resolve the affects instead of allowing them to accumulate, and thus make our condition still more hopeless and intolerable.¹⁵

Tagore, I am afraid, does not explain why music rouses affects except stating that music, with reference to our trivial feelings i.e., love, hope and pain, rouses emotions, and equates them with the throb of inner life and nature. His clearest explanation, as far as we could collect, is that by stimulating apprehension or illusion of the throb of the inner life and nature music rouses affects.

If we argue that rousing of affect in Tagore's music is a necessary and not a sufficient condition of music, it may be a correct assessment. Probably this is why, we understand, Tagore referred to 'expression and affect' in a single statement. Music, according to Tagore, does not consist in rousing of affects only but means their expression too. The act of rousing affect and its resolution by music, if possible, involves a logical process. And hence, this is not an arbitrary coalition.

In a state of innumerable affects being stimulated by various agents leading, in all probability, to uncertainty or suspense, we are left with no choice but to try to resolve them. "If in real life", said Casserer, 'we had to endure all those emotions through which

we live in Sophocles', *Oedipus* or in Shakespeare's *King Lear* we should scarcely survive the shock and strain. But art turns all these pains and outrages, these cruelties and atrocities into a means of self liberation, thus giving an inner freedom which cannot be attained in any other way".¹⁶ Tagore, in fact, almost in a similar vein has stated that the profound truth of art is its initiating the joy of renunciation. It alleviates us from the self. If we keep our attention on this statement of Tagore we would probably find it rather easy to resolve the dispute between the act of rousing affect and their expression.

Music, thus resolves the affects roused by itself by identifying their real character and giving expression to them. It hence, creates an atmosphere of ease and relaxation. Music, here, instead of charting the inhibitions becomes the 'emotive correlates' of the heard sounds either individually or in a sound structure. Further, it can alleviate us from the inhibitions already acquired without giving rise to further inhibitions. That music can do so can be presumed, because music in the act of alleviation also identifies the emotion roused. Since, music can identify the emotions, it can correctly determine the character of the inhibition already acquired and can formulate music patterns co-eval with the inhibited emotion instead of rousing fresh affects. It would, thus, create a sense of release, and the 'inner freedom' of which Casserer spoke and Tagore prophesised could be enjoyed without any apprehension of further suspense or tension. The examples of suppression such as we ordinarily come across, in extremely unfavourable circumstances, may not possibly be repeated; for music by activation and expression not only enthralls us but empties us, in a restricted sense, of all the inhibitions we acquired.

Thus, when Tagore states 'music is expression and affect arousing stimulus,' he very seriously used this expression to mean arousing of affect and their resolution through expression. In our life, among other things, we are bound to acquire affects, and it is music which discovers their character and formulates their sound patterns. Tagore has repeatedly pointed out the fact that music brings in the sense of relief from various anguishes. If it does, then the statement that "music expresses feeling, is another way of saying music resolves affects"¹⁷ appears to be true.

IV

In view of this discussion, it would not be logically fallacious to conclude that there is, in fact, no contradiction between conjectures (a), (b) and (c). When Tagore says that music is 'significant form', he obviously means its efficiency to express feeling, and when he says,

"music stimulates inhibition", he probably explains how feelings originate. As there is no fundamental contradiction between these two propositions it may again be argued, that their coalescence only can cannot the precise meaning in which Tagore used the term 'music'. Thus music, according to Tagore, means both activation and expression through 'significant form' the vital emotions that lead to our relief, elation and above all, inner freedom.

NOTES

1. Tagore Rabindranath—Sangit Chinta (Calcutta-1966) to be subsequently referred to as Sangit. Essays. "Sangit O Bhava", p. 7, "Sangit O Kavita" pp. 22, 23.
2. Sangit—p. 12.
3. Ibid—p. 294.
4. Sahitya Darpana.
5. Sangit—pp. 54, 55, 88.
6. Ibid—p. 37.
7. Collingwood, R.G.—The Principles of Art (Oxford, 1938) p. 11.
8. Sangit—p. 32.
9. Ibid—p. 54.
10. Meyer, E.L.—Emotion and Meaning in Music (Chicago-1956) p. 14.
11. Sangit—p. 300.
12. Langer, S.K.—Feeling and Form (New York-1953) p. 126.
13. Sangit—p. 294.
14. Langer, S.K.—Feeling and Form, p. 32.
15. In writing this section I freely borrowed from the ideas of Ervin Laszlo and for that matter express my indebtedness to him.
16. Cassirer Earnest—An Essay on Man (Garden City, New York—1953) p. 191.
17. Laszlo, E.—Affect and Expression in Music Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. XXVIII, No. 2.