

TAGORE'S THOUGHTS ON MUSIC : DIMENSIONS OF APPRECIATION

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Much is being done on Tagore's songs. History and chronology of Tagore's compositions, their theoretical details, uses of *ragas* and *raginis* and other regional tunes, structural peculiarities of all important *talas* to which his songs have been set, the characteristic modes of his tunes, the literary value of the texts of the songs and above all the perfect fusion of tune and texts — these are the main discourses of the scholars on Tagore's songs. There is no doubt that songs are the best of Tagore's creations and we have been enjoying them. They will last as part of the genuine heritage of the cultural life of our country.

In this article, I discuss a parallelly important topic which may be described as Tagore's thoughts on music or Tagore's philosophy of music or more specifically, Tagore as a musicologist. Little work has been done on this.

Visva-Bharati has published Tagore's *Sangit Chinta*, which compiles some articles and lectures on music by Tagore, dialogue between Tagore and Dilip Kumar Ray, Tagore and Rolland, Tagore and Einstein and Tagore and H.G. Wells; and the correspondence between Tagore and Professor Dhurjati Prasad Mukherjee and a few portions from his autobiography and letters. But this compilation does not exhaust Tagore's thoughts on music, much of which lies scattered in his poems, plays, short stories, novels, essays and in his personal letters to friends and relatives. Off and on Tagore thinks on music, talks on music and writes on music. Very often he uses musical terminology even while describing other than music. He draws analogy in musical terms in case of beauty, love, affection, attachment and all other fine sentiments. Music is indeed part of the idiom of his natural expression. Such writing needs to be compiled from his literature so as to make it possible to study Tagore as a musicologist. It is remarkable how closely he associates music with human life and how he elevates music to a loftier plane.

Music is an art first. Musicology follows later. Musicology is a growing

subject. It has not yet grown into a subject of systematic study. Musicology may be divided into three parts: science of music; history of music; and philosophy or aesthetics of music. Tagore's contribution to the philosophy of music will enrich this last aspect of musicology.

Ancient Indian authors such as Bharata, Saranga Deva, Hanuman and some others wrote on music. In the West, studies on music are not very ancient. German musicologists or aestheticians like Ferruccio Busoni or Eduard Hanslick are famous in their field. But most of the thinkers, whether of East or of West, have thought on individual lines. Their theories and dogmas have not been universally or widely accepted. It is not possible to discuss them in this limited article. Our main topic is Tagore. Though Tagore is a poet of artistic temperament, his thinking is quite logical and scientific; and that is why Tagore should be recognized as a musicologist or as an aesthetician in music.

Under the auspices of the Bethune Society, Tagore delivered what should be distinguished as his first lecture on music in the Medical College Hall on the 19th April, 1881. He was only twenty then. The president was Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjee. The lecture dealt with the role of human feeling in performing music. Lifelessness and rigidity of most of the then classical singers led Tagore to adopt the point of view contained in this lecture. The main purport of this lecture was that the hard and fast rules of *ragas* and *raginis* and *talas* should be put aside, and music should be pregnant with human feeling. The poem or the text of a song must be given the same importance as that given to the tune. Along with this lecture, Tagore gave demonstrations of lively illustrations of his points.

After delivering this lecture, Tagore read Herbert Spencer's "The Origin and Function of Music" and found ample support for his opinion. So, Tagore preached that music should not severely stick to old grammar. It should be the language of emotions, and that is why, the text of a song should have the primary role.

But later on Tagore contradicted himself and rectified his former opinion. He admitted that the art of music has its own characteristic and function and it should not be a slave to the verbal entity of the song. Words are limited to their worldly meaning, but good music leads us to a higher level. That is why the text of Hindustani Classical music is so negligible. While writing a foreword to "Thirty Songs from the Punjab and Kashmir", recorded by Ratan Debi, Tagore wrote,

"Listening to her I felt more clearly than ever that our music is the music of cosmic emotion. It deals not primarily with the drama of the vicissitudes of human life."

Let us also quote a portion of the seventeenth poem of *Shesh Saptak*. The poem was primarily written as a letter to Professor Dhurjati Prasad Mukherjee, a great critic and lover of music.

"When human feeling expresses itself through the medium of a musical tune, it takes the dynamic and cosmic tunefulness of this universe into a desired shape, adds style to it and makes it more in a peculiar way. That limit-bound dynamism takes the form of the art of music."

When Tagore went to Rolland's at Villeneuve on the 24th June, 1926, music was one of the points of their discussions. Tagore said,

"The purpose of art is not to give expression to emotion but to use it for the creation of significant form.... 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 an end in itself?"

✍ "A great musician must always use emotion as substance out of which beautiful forms are created. But in Europe musicians have had such an abundance of good material that they tended to overemphasise the emotional aspects. A great musician must have poise, for without it his work perishes."

From the above dialogue it is quite understood that both Tagore and Rolland thought that emotion has no direct role in music but it has a very subtle contribution to the creation of significant form in the art of music.

We don't know whether Tagore read "A New Aesthetic of Music" by Ferruccio Busoni, the famous German Aesthete. But we find a close similarity of Tagore's new-point and that of Busoni. Let us quote from Busoni:

"Music was born free; and to win freedom is its destiny. It will become the most complete of all reflexes of Nature by reason of its untrammelled immateriality. Even the poetic word ranks lower in point of incorporeality."

Later on he adds,

"... For our whole system of tone, key, and tonality, taken in its entirety, is only a part of a fraction of one defracted ray from that Sun, "Music", in the empyrean of the "eternal harmony."

Nietzsche's appreciation of music is found in his book *Beyond Good and Evil* (Jenseits von Gut und Bose), where he says,

"I could imagine a music whose rarest charm should consist in its complete divorce from the Good and the Bad;..."

So we see that in point of incorporeality of the art of Music Tagore, Busoni and Nietzsche thought alike.

Now let us watch the next step of music appreciation by Tagore. Having been invited by Sangit Sangha, Tagore wrote and read an essay entitled *Sangiter Mukti*, i.e., freedom of music, at the Rammohan Library, Calcutta under the Presidentship of Sir Ashutosh Choudhury, in 1917. In this essay Tagore discussed both Indian and European music. Tagore said that in the domain of the art of music the performer is the via media between the composer and the listener. The performer, in accordance with his talent and culture may stand as a barrier like a mountain or can play the role of the Suez Canal. In European music, the performer has little scope of improvisation. But in Indian music the performer has a creative role. The cause of decay of Indian music lies in the fact that ungifted and unmusical Ustads show their technical skill of tune and rhythm neglecting the essence of the beauty of music inherited from the great composers like Tansen.

In July, 1921 Tagore delivered a lecture on our music at the annual function of Sangit Sangha. In this lecture he synthesizes the two extreme opinions in the philosophy of music, the first treating music as a language of emotions and the second preaching the unspeakable immateriality of music. He now says that music has two ways of expression, the first being absolute or pure music and the second one being the song-form of music which is closely associated with a perfect blending of lyric and its tune and rhythm. Tagore places the first form in the up-country or the north-western part of India and the second form in Bengal. He refers to the *kirtan* style of music prevailing in Bengal, in which the words play a vital role. His own compositions are the best examples of this blending of lyric and the rhythmic tune. Once Dilip Kumar Ray wanted from Tagore freedom of variation from the rigid structure of Tagore-songs as regards their tune. But Tagore did not agree with the proposal pointing to the inalienability of the total forms of his musical creations. He may sanction freedom of interpretation by means of a little improvisation to only a very few gifted performers but not to all.

Tagore's view regarding the appeal of music was that the form of a particular style of music may be regional but the inner appeal of any good music is universal. Language is no bar to music appreciation. A music-lover can react to music without being at home in the verbal structure. Moreover, the art-effect of a successful musical performance transcends the style of rendering it. In course of a discussion with Rolland, Tagore said,

"The starting point of all arts, poetry, painting or music, is the breath, the rhythm which is inherent in the human body and which is the same everywhere, and is, therefore, universal. I believe, musicians must often be inspired by the rhythm of the circulation of blood and breath. A very interesting study would be a comparison of four tunes of different

countries. With more developed music things become more complex, and the underlying similarities cannot be systematically traced."

Folk music of different countries have some sort of subtle similarities, but classical music of different countries have been developed in different ways. Yet, it was the challenge of the aspect of the universality of music that led Tagore to lay the foundation of research work and comparative study of music of different countries for musicians and musicologists. Dilip Kumar Ray also discussed the regionality and universality of music with Tagore. He was inquisitive of the absolute value of art. Tagore told him that the absolute value can be determined or judged only in course of the passing tides of time. The superfluous may decay but the essential will exist.

Tagore and H.G. Wells had an illuminating conversation on this point in June 1930 in Geneva. H.G. Wells believed that "Music is of all things in the world the most international." Both of them thought that one shall be able to appreciate the music of other country by the process of closer acquaintance with them. Radio links together the world. Wells expected further scientific inventions for communication of musical ideas.

Though Albert Einstein was a scientist, he was a keen lover and critic of music too. In August, 1930 Tagore and Einstein had had an exchange of thoughts and ideas about music. Einstein learnt many things about Indian music from Tagore. Tagore explained to him.

"There is in human affairs an element of elasticity also — some freedom within a small range, which is for the expression of our personality. It is like the musical system in India, which is not so rigidly fixed as in the western music. Our composers give a certain definite outline, a system of melody and rhythmic arrangement, and within a certain limit the player can improvise upon it. He must be one with the law of that particular melody, and then he can give spontaneous expression to his musical feeling within the prescribed regulation. We praise the composer for his genius in creating a foundation along with a super-structure of melodies, but we expect from the player his own skill in the creation of variations of melodic flourish and ornamentation. In creation we follow the central law of existence, but, if we do not cut ourselves adrift from it, we cannot have sufficient freedom within the limits of our personality for the fullest self-expression."

Tagore's personality was absorbed in music and that is why, he compares human life with music. Ample examples can be sought out from his literature.

In the short story *Chorai Dhan* in *Galpa Guchchha* Tagore draws an analogy of music while depicting conjugal life. Let us quote,

"Marriage is just like a big form of programme — music of the whole of life. Its burden remains the same, but the improvization of music extends to newer stages day by day. I have comprehended this from Sunetra. She has an unending wealth of love. *The ragini Sahana* is being played all day long in her being."

Tagore compares a deep and passionate human love with the serene joy of listening to good music. In the drama *Raja* the queen Sudarshana tells the king,

"Speak on, speak on in this way. Your utterances seem to me like music, music floating down through ages, as if I have been hearing it in all my transmigrations. Is it you who sang, and did you sing to me? Or, is she nobler and more beautiful than I am, whom you sang to? I can see that perfect beauty in your music. Is it in you, or in me?"

Love is the best wealth of the human heart. And, music is the finest of all the branches of fine arts. Many great composers have expressed love through music; but Tagore establishes the identity of love and music. Thus he opens a novel dimension of music - appreciation. This is certainly a great contribution to the aesthetics of music.

Another important aspect of music is associated with nature. Tagore, a lover of nature, draws inspiration from nature while composing music. He enjoys the murmuring brook, the roar of the ocean, the sound of the wind and the whistling of the bird. But he feels that the so-called music of nature is an end in itself, but man has a creative faculty. So, real music is made by man and made for man. In the poem number twenty-eight of *Balaka*, Tagore says,

"You have given song to the bird, and the bird sings; it yields nothing more. You have given me voice, and I yield more than that; I perform music."

It will not be out of place to mention Eduard Hanslick's views on this particular point of music and nature. He bombarded all the fancies and fantasies of the prejudiced school of music. In spite of some exaggeration, Hanslick's words are to be estimated to realize the real beautiful in music. He was of the opinion that nature is destitute of music. Here is a quotation from the English translation of his book,

"Even the purest phenomenon in the natural world of sound — the song of birds — has no relation to music, as it cannot be reduced to our scale."

Regarding natural gift of human voice Hanslick says,

"Nature has given man but the organs and the inclination to sing,

together with the faculty to create a musical system having its roots in the most simple relations of sound."

It is true that man produces music out of his own fertile imagination, he creates from within. But Tagore is not so extreme as Hanslick. He would never say that nature is destitute of music.

Another important aspect of Tagore's thoughts on music is concerned with the communication process, that is to say, the relationship between the artiste and the listener. In the chapter Sri Bilas of the novel *Chaturanga* we can find out a fine depiction of this relationship. The performer creates form out of joy inside him or her, and the listener derives joy out of the said form. This particular thought on music is expressed in course of a discussion about theosophy. Let us come to the specified situation of the novel. It is Tagore's philosophy, expressed in the version of Sachish,

"Sachish carried on. 'He loves form, and so he always comes down to form. But we cannot live with form alone, and that is why, we have to rush towards the formless. He is free, so his play is in bondage; we are confined, and so, our joy is in freedom.'"

Again Sachish added —

"Damini, cannot you understand? He who sings goes from joy to *Ragini*, and he who listens goes from *Ragini* to joy. One comes from freedom to bondage and the other goes from bondage to freedom. Thus the two meet together. He is singing on and we are listening. He composes and makes us listen, we unfold the form while listening to it."

So, we find that in the perspective of his theological belief of form and the formless, Tagore unfolds the nature of communication between a good artiste and a sensitive listener.

To Tagore, music is more than a form of art. He feels that the whole being is imbued with music. Even in silence he can recollect the enjoyment of a fine piece of music once experienced. Let us conclude with the quotation from the poem number eight of *Shesh Lekha*, composed in a serene mood in the morning hours of the 25th April, 1941, just a few months before his demise, when he is aware of the fact that his days were numbered.

"In the first year of marriage the flute was played in *Shahana* in all the directions, ripples of joyful laughter arose. But today the morning is smiling in mystic silence. The flute is being played in the deep tune of *Kanada* with the beckoning of the *Saptarshis* in penance. Five years' pleasant dream of gleaming joy had brought the heaven of fullness in this world. The *raga Basanta Pancham* was played in the beginning, it is at its extreme height, rich

with all tune and rhythm. With every step on the flowery bed of woods the anklet is jingling in the *raga Basanta*."

The depth of Tagore's verbal expression shows the intensity of his feeling. Musical sensitivity becomes the terms of expression of experiences of life for he had felt the identity of the two.

NOTES

1. *Sangit Chinta*, Rabindranath Tagore
2. *Geeta Bitan*, Rabindranath Tagore.
3. *Galpa Guchcha*, Rabindranath Tagore.
4. *Cheturanga*, Rabindranath Tagore
5. *Balaka*, Rabindranath Tagore
8. *Raja*, Rabindranath Tagore.
8. *The Beautiful in Music*, Eduard Hanslick
9. *A New Esthetic of Music*, Ferruccio Bosoni
10. *Essays on Music*, Romain Rolland.
11. *Jenseits von Gut und Bose*, Nietzsche
12. *The Origin and Function of Music*, Herbert Spencer.