

Tagore and the Sikh Religion

SARAN SINGH*, I.A.S. (RETD.)

* President, The Sikh Cultural Centre, Kolkata & Editor, The Sikh Review, Kolkata 700 016.
Formerly Secretary to Govt. of India & Chief Secretary, Bihar.

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AS A STUDENT OF LITERATURE I recall the letter Tagore wrote to the Viceroy, whereby he relinquished his Knighthood in righteous protest against the Jallianwala Bagh masscre. He described the tragedy as "without parallel in the history of civilized governments." Looking back, his anguish continues to reverberate in the corridors of history, for he articulated the axiomatic human longing for liberty, justice and dignity. Now, more than eight decades later, his admonition of the colonial superpower still rings true, Tagore words as the people of Iraq face invasion and occupation by a "power which has the most terribly efficient organisation for destruction of human lives." (His words in 1919).

The poet had, by his dignified protest, re-awakened the conscience of the Indian nation and won the heart of every patriotic Indian. As a document of conscience, Tagore's letter seems to have provided inspiration for the universal declaration of Human Rights which was later adopted by the UN on 10th December 1948. The Preamble of the UN declaration says likewise: "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world"

My other early favourite quotation from Tagore is from his book of poems "Naibedya," titled *Prarthna*:

"Where the mind is without fear
Head held high for a vision clear
Of a world unfragmented
By parochial walls elated"

Its moral grandeur resonates with the *Gurubani's* soulful prayer:

ਸਭੇ ਜੀਅ ਸਮਾਲਿ ਅਪਣੀ ਮਿਹਰ ਕਰੁ ॥
ਐਨੁ ਪਾਣੀ ਮੁਚੁ ਉਪਾਇ ਦੁਖ ਦਾਲਦੁ ਭੈਨਿ ਤਰੁ ॥
ਅਰਦਾਸਿ ਸੁਣੀ ਦਾਤਾਰਿ ਹੋਈ ਸਿਸਟਿ ਠਰੁ ॥
ਲੇਵਹੁ ਕੰਠਿ ਲਗਾਇ ਅਪਦਾ ਸਭ ਹਰੁ ॥
ਨਾਨਕ ਨਾਮੁ ਧਿਆਇ ਪੁਭ ਕਾ ਸਫਲੁ ਘਰੁ ॥

(Slok M.5 - SGGS: 1251)

Gracious Lord, be Merciful,
Keep all creatures in Thy care.
Bless us abundantly with food and water
Rid us of pain and poverty (of spirit) ..

The Sikh inspirational scripture wisdom, embodied in Guru Granth Sahib, is the poetry of pure devotion. T.S. Elliot reaffirms this, when he wrote: "True poetry merges the morality and the aesthetics. The human concern elevates poetry into a higher kind of morality." Tagore's poetry does exactly that. *Gurubani*, however, needs to be approached with love, devotion and humility. Only then its power to illumine our hearts and minds can sweep away the cobwebs of doubt and duality, dispel discord and discrimination.

Many years were to pass before I discovered Tagore's extraordinary "love affair" with Sikhism, and the legacy of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh Ji, from his autobiography. In the 1870's Tagore's father, Maharshi Debendranath, who was among illustrious pioneers of Brahma Samaj [Lit. 'The Society of God'], used to visit Amritsar periodically in quest of divine inspiration. For some time the Maharshi's personal attendant was 'a fine featured young Sikh'. Rabindranath - barely ten years old - recalls his visits to the Golden Temple (that we call Harimandir, or Darbar Sahib) thus:

The Gurudwara at Amritsar I remember as a dream. Many were the mornings when I went to the Sikh temple set within a lake. Singing of *bhajans* was continuous. Seated in the midst of the Sikh worshippers, my father would join them in song, and they would greet him with cheerful cordiality"

Rabindranath also recalls that his father would often invite one or another of the *raagis* - singers to his house for *kirtan* sessions. Evidently, these memories of his youthful experience not only lingered in his mind but also made a deep impression on him. We are told that, as a teenager, he rendered into Bengali several hymns (*Pauris*) from Jap ji, some of which would be sung at the Sunday prayer of Brahma Samaj.

The late Prof. Amalendu Bose, writing in the Calcutta-based Journal, ***The Sikh Review***, in 1970's, tells us that the "pure monotheism of Japji appealed deeply to the monotheistic mind of the young poet... Guruji's beautiful exhortations to the Sikhs to abjure all that is false and narrow, and to imbibe all that is truly unifying and comprehensive were the qualities that won the poet's heart.

Permit me to quote just one of the hymns in *Japji*:

so dr kyhw so Gr kyhw ijq bih srb smwly ॥

What kind of doorway, what kind of mansion?
Where You sit and care for Your creation!
Where melodies of countless strumming instruments,
And countless minstrels playing on it are heard.

In how many ragas and raginis is your adoration sung?
And how many celestial musicians sing of you?
There, even wind, water and fire glorify Your name...

In a manner of speaking, *Japji* is theology for everyman, a kind of universal adoration of the all-pervading Spirit of God. "**There is only One Being, who is the Creator and the uncaused cause of all. He has created the whole universe through his vital Will which is diffused throughout (AOq-poRq).**" The Absolute

is beyond words, nameless, imageless. When he caused this universe, His Word was the cause: klqw pswE ieko kvwE iqs

qy hoey l~K drlAwE ॥

For the first time the divine splendour was spelt out in the common man's language. Guru Nanak replaced the worship of countless gods and goddesses with the adoration of one God. Guru Gobind Singh re-affirmed this precept: c~kR ichn Aru brn jwiq Aru pwq nihn jih..... The Lord of all the worlds is One. He is *nirankâr*, Formless, without physical attributes. He is not born, nor does He die - to be born again. He is self-existent.

I would like to believe that Sikhism's appeal for Tagore was rooted in his childhood memories of the radiance and cadence of *Gurubani kirtan* that he imbibed with his father during their sojourns in Amritsar. The musical Baul tradition of Bengal and Maharshi Debendranath's Brahma-Samaj background seemed to cement a bond with the Sikh legacy. Like the Baul idealism, the Sikh philosophy embraces all human societies, recognizing the ultimate unity of the supreme being - who is all-pervading - best realised, experimentally in the core of the human heart!

Tagore's own devotional poetry is replete with intimation of *Gurubani*: Let me illustrate:

*Jodi e amaro hridaya -
duaro bandha rahe go
Kabhu dwar bhenge
Tumi asho, more prané,
Phiria jao na, Prabhu!*

The lyricism of these poems, time and again, recall to mind the *Gurubani*'s compelling, concise and coherent enunciation of the life's moral purpose. Guru Granth's versified message likewise packs astonishing spiritual power and majesty. In so far as the holy text is set to symphonic *ragas*, its appeal is to the deep faith residing within every heart, more than the intellect. The holy word affirms that the human being in devotion is capable of experiencing "AnuBau pRkWS" and realising God - Howsoever subtle and incomprehensible He may be, for the True devotee He is *not* impersonal:

ਸਭ ਤੇ ਪਰੈ ਪਰੈ ਤੇ ਉਚਾ ਗਹਿਰ ਗੰਭੀਰ ਅਥਾਹਿਓ ॥

ਓਤਿ ਪੋਤਿ ਮਿਲਿਓ ਭਗਤਨ ਕਉ ਜਨ ਸਿਉ ਪਰਦਾ ਲਾਹਿਓ॥

(SGGS: 1299)

In translation, the Guru says: Thou, O Lord, are beyond conception, unfathomable and profound. Yet to Your True Devotee, You are fully manifest, stripped of all veils, ever in effulgent glory!

Let us, now, turn to Tagore's felicitous prose, his essays. For Sikhs, and indeed for all people, Tagore's essay on Guru Gobind Singh has a special significance - both in timing and content. It was written at a time when the sun had set on the Sikh kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the Punjab, Kashmir & Frontier Province had been annexed by a wily and deceitful British Governor General, Lord Dalhousie. The Maharaja's youngest son, Duleep Singh, still a minor, had been whisked away to

England, then ruled by Queen Victoria. With him also went the legendary *Koh-e-Noor* robbed from the Lahore Treasury.

Tagore's essays on Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, in simple idiom and direct style, seem to be meant for the younger generation of Bengalis. Perhaps Rabindranth sought to focus on the piety and moral grandeur of Guru Nanak, as also the matchless sacrifice and valour of Guru Gobind Singh that transformed Sikhs into *saint-soldiers*. The essay on Guru Nanak tells us of the extraordinary child, son of Kalu, born in Talwandi, who, as a youngster preferred to spread God's holy Name, instead of becoming a businessman earning gold. Tagore mentions Guru Nanak's journey to Mecca, where fellow-travellers objected to his feet stretching to holy Ka'aba, the house of God. Nanak sweetly begged them to kindly turn his feet to any direction where God was not!

Tagore's Essay concludes with a gem: **"The Sikhs whom you see around you today are men of sturdy build, handsome countenance, of tough strength and unflinching courage. They are *sishyas* - disciples of Baba Nanak. There were no Sikhs before Nanak. It was his noble personality and sublime spirituality that brought this race into existence. It is through his teachings that their temper is fearless; they keep their heads erect; their character and countenance are brightened with magnanimity."**

[Translation by late Prof. Amalendu Bose]

This characterization remains unexcelled in Indian literature. In *Katha-o-kahini* (tales and legends) Tagore has also immortalized the legends of Banda Bahadur and Bhai Taru Singh - both 18th century heroes of the Sikh history. For steadfastness in the face of stark tragedy '*Bandi Veer*' (Chained Hero) stands out as poetry of perennial inspiration. Similarly the story of Taru Singh *Prarhanateet Daan* - in terse and taut poetry, symbolizes not only the grim determination but also the rejection of tyranny by the young Sikh who won't part with his *beni*, - the *kesh*, that is integral to the Sikh discipline and indeed cherished by all human beings. Tagore's contribution to the understanding of the mystique of Sikhism, its theology and history, is a precious part of Indian heritage. At this point, let me recall to you Tagore's Essay on Shivaji & Guru Gobind Singh, written mid-1920's. In the minds of most people the image of Guru Gobind is that of a warrior-Guru. Tagore speculated that the "Tenth Master" had "deviated" from Nanak's Path of peace and goodwill for humanity at large. Indeed Tagore said: "the role of warrior does not belong to a Prophet but to an army general." Here, one wonders why a comparative view escaped Tagore. Sri Krishna's advice to Arjuna on the battleground of Mahabharat reverberates throughout the corridors of time. Similarly, Guru Nanak says:

jE qv pyRm Kyln kw cwE`||

isr Dr qll gll morl AwE ||

ieq mwrg pYr DrljY isr dljY kwix n kljY ||

Guru Gobind echoed the same precept:

Avr vwsnw nwhl moih Dm XuD kE cwE ||

"I have no other ambition than to struggle for righteousness."

His mission on earth is best summed up in his own words:

dyh isvw br moih iehY Sub krmn qy kbhU nw troN ॥

n fro Air isa jb jwie lro inscX kr Apnl jlq kroN ॥

Ar isK ho Apny hl mn kE ieh lwlc hE gux qE aucroN ॥

jb Awv kl AvD indwn bnY AiQ hl rMx mY qb JUj mroN ॥

It is scarcely realized what mental anguish Guru Gobind Singh must have gone through before he finally accepted the principle of use of force to right a wrong, the same dilemma that confronted Arjuna in the field of Kurukshetra in Mahabharata. How is one to decide whether one should turn the other cheek; or to submit to oppression and tyranny - in the hope that his gesture will bring a change of heart in the oppressor? Or that one should resist tyranny, and ensure restoration of justice and goodness, however long the struggle!

Guru Gobind Singh faced this dilemma. His father, Guru Tegh Bahadur had been executed in Delhi's Chandni Chowk for no other offence than championing the cause of the Kashmiri Pandits who faced forcible conversion - or extermination. Long before Guru Tegh Bahadur, the fifth Guru Arjun Dev, the builder of Amritsar's Harimandir, had been convicted of trumped-up charges and tortured to death at Lahore in 1605 during the Mughal reign of Jahangir. Both Noor Jehan and Mian Mir had protested but to no avail.

It was no longer a time for turning the other cheek. On *Poila Vaisakh* in 1699 Guru Gobind Singh instituted the Khalsa Panth as his response. He redeemed his pledge - oft quoted by Swami Vivekananda - svw lwK sy iek IVaNU qbY goibMd isMG nwm khwaUN.

As Tagore's essay records, Shivaji clearly and unabashedly wanted to establish Hindu sovereignty, Guru Gobind Singh, on the other hand, fought defensive wars. His *Zafarnama*, addressed to Aurangzeb, in 1707, spells out his compulsions:

ba lachargi darmian amdam

ba tadbiro teer-o-tufang amdam

chun kar az hama hilatey dar guzasht

halal ast burdan ba shamsheer-dast

The Mughals, Lodhis, Afghans and Baluchi hordes had, for centuries, and repeatedly, invaded the Indo Gangetic plains unhindered, and massacred, rampaged and looted the people. It is nothing short of miraculous that these invaders were beaten back by Guru Gobind Singh's Khalsa warriors and pushed across Khyber pass - beyond the frontiers of India. It has never been fully appreciated by conventional historians that the Sikhs of Guru Gobind Singh forever put an end to the *brutalisation* of Indian masses.

Most significantly, Guru Gobind Singh took special care that anti-Muslim sentiment should not stain his crusade against tyranny of the latter Mughals. Both Hindus and Muslims fought shoulder to shoulder with Sikhs in each of his defensive wars. This secular tradition continued into the times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, (1799 to 1849) who was - as pointed by Jawaharlal Nehru in his *Discovery of India* - one of the few genuinely secular rulers of our country.

Guru Gobind Singh had intense faith in his own divine mission. He forbade his soliders from looting and made them take solemn vows that they would never molest women or kill a fleeing adversary. No wonder he inspired an incredibly fierce sense of loyalty and sacrifice. The story is told of an old woman who came to Guru Gobind for help. She told him that her husband and two sons had been killed fighting the aggressors. All that remained of her family was her youngest son, who was dangerously ill. She begged for the Guru's blessings to restore him to health - not to have someone to look after her in old age - but in order that this son too could attain martyrdom in the battlefield!

The New Millennium is, in many respects, the age of conflict, alienation and anxiety. The unlettered masses cling to superstition and look for supernatural intervention for being rid of their woes. Arguably, 'globalization' has failed to provide moral and social justice. Instead it has spawned a type of religious fundamentalism that threatens the very existence of civilized society. It is in this context that the Guru Granth and Sikhism become relevant, and the Gurus' message a moral imperative. In any re-assertion of the moral and spiritual principles, therefore, we must gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Sikhism, as well as the spirit of 'kavi-guru' Rabindranath Tagore.

