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Revival of Vaiṣṇavism in Rabindranath Tagore's Lyrics

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore's spiritual and literary evolution signifies a crucial juncture in the modern history of Indian thought. This paper attempts to examine the revival of Vaiṣṇavism within Tagore's work with special importance to his lyrics, tracing its trajectory from the adolescent pastiches of medieval *padāvalī* poetry in *Bhanusingha Thakurer Padabali* to the universalized theism of *Gitanjali* and the foundational principles of his "Religion of Man". By situating Tagore's work within the historical context of nineteenth-century Bengal this study explores how Tagore reanimated the core tenets of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. The paper also investigates Tagore's engagement with the Baul heritage, his development of the *Jīvan Devatā* concept, and his modernization of kīrtana aesthetics influenced by 18th-century musical scholarship. The results reveal that Tagore brought Vaiṣṇava humanism back to life as a method for people to be spiritually free and socially acceptable.

Keywords: Vaiṣṇavism, Gītāñjali, Baul Mysticism, Religious Humanism, Rabindra Sangeet.

Introduction

Raja Rammohan Roy established Brāhmo Samāj, with Tagore's father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, impacting it deeply. The Brāhmo faith aimed to restore Hinduism to the formless monotheism of the Upaniṣads, frequently denouncing idolatry linked to mainstream Vaiṣṇavism as "superstitious and morally suspect" (Kennedy 3). This tradition, which had spread throughout the area since the sixteenth-century movement led by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, depicted the divine as a personal lover rather than a distant judge, offering a "friendly union" between God and humanity (Thakur 607). Tagore's contribution to the resurgence of Vaiṣṇavism was never a conversion of his beliefs but a nuanced assimilation of its aesthetic and emotional essence. Tagore made Vaiṣṇava Padabali popular among the educated elite, taking it from the "narrow walls of the King's court" (Majumder 5) and the exclusive domain of disciples to the wider world of global literature. He observed the flood of love in the Vaiṣṇava tradition as a force that could break down the walls of narrowness and social

discrimination. The course of this revival begins with the leap in the literary career of Tagore and ends with his acme of maturity - his philosophical proclamations with regard to the “Religion of Man”.

The traditional Vaiṣṇava literature in Bengal forms the necessary background to Tagore's later synthesis. As its foundation, the *padāvalī* literature is a genre of lyrical hymns celebrating the beauty and mystic charm of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa divine couple in their eternal playground, Vrindavan. This work caused a stir that quickly spread to temple performances and painting schools, setting a standard for expressing *bhakti rasa*, the devotional sentiment through sexual desire and spiritual union. The Maithili poet Vidyāpati and the Bengali poet Caṇḍīdāsa built on Jayadeva's work in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In his autobiography, *Jivansmriti*, Tagore wrote that a book of Vidyāpati's poems in the family library “initiated youthful Robi's interest towards Vaiṣṇava lyrics” (Tagore 9). Chaitanya Mahaprabhu made communal singing more important by creating Nāma-saṁkīrtana and Nagara-kīrtana, which are devotional and processional singing and chanting that became tools for social change. Chaitanya declared a communal worship that surpassed the spiritual dominance of the Brahman priesthood, asserting that even an outcaste was “adorable to God if they possessed faith” (Majumder 9). This democratic idea, which said that ‘God's grace does not care for caste and family’ was a step toward Tagore's universal humanism. Narahari Chakravarti, wrote *Bhaktiratnākara* and pointed out the instruments and musical notes used in the *rasamandal*, Kṛṣṇa's circle dance of divine love. He said that “devotees needed musical knowledge to really appreciate Kṛṣṇa” (Williams 182). This had a direct effect on the musical structure of Rabindra Sangeet.

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative, historical-analytical framework in investigating the revival of the Vaiṣṇava tenets in select lyrics of Rabindranath Tagore. Accordingly, the research develops from the diachronic perspective on Tagore's literary and spiritual development: it traces the development of his engagement with Vaiṣṇava aesthetics over three distinct phases of his career. In the first phase, the paper provides a textual analysis of *Bhanusingha Thakurer Padabali* and how Tagore used the medieval *padāvalī* convention and Brajabuli language to mimic the devotional sentiments of the mediaeval poets Vidyāpati and Caṇḍīdāsa. The second phase study explores further on the assimilation of Upaniṣadic “Formless Absolute” into “Personal God”

through the lens of Vaiṣṇava religiosity as revealed in Tagore's articulation of Jīvan Devatā or Lord of Life. The third phase study deals with universalized theism as revealed in Gitanjali and its philosophical culmination as “Religion of Man,” where Vaiṣṇava religiosity is articulated as a means for both social and spiritual emancipation.

The Bhanusingha

Rabindranath Tagore's formal initiation into the Vaiṣṇava literary tradition transpired through the act of creative subterfuge. He got the Mahajan Padabali Sangraha. It is a collection of old Vaiṣṇava poems published by Akshay Chandra Sarkar in 1872. Tagore started writing his own padas in the *Brajabuli* dialect because he said it was an “unknown mysterious world under the earth” (Majumder 3). They were published as *Bhanusingha Thakurer Padabali*. Tagore used the *Brajabuli* dialect, which is a mix of Maithili and Bengali. It was his attempt to show how musical and direct Vidyāpati's work was. He was able to recreate the rhythmic feel of the medieval Bengali works in “Gahan kusum-kunja majhe” (Majumder 8). The textual analysis of ‘Bhanusingha’ demonstrates an engagement of devotion. The poem “Sun sun sajani hriday pranamam” shows how Vidyāpati influenced it, while his “Phutal kusum naba kanjakutir ban” does not (7). In “Trishita nayane - bana patha pane” Tagore describes the young woman Rādhā “anxiously watching the forest path for her lover” (6). This is a classic example of *abhisāra* or the journey of love. In Vaiṣṇava poetry, nature is often used as a silent character in the emotional drama.

Bhanusingha Thakurer Padabali started out as a stylistic experiment, but it helped people connect deeply with Rādhā's character. In these early poems, Tagore depicts Rādhā not only as a mythological consort but as a “lovesick woman experiencing the raw pain of separation” (Chakrabarty 42). This empathy for the feminine perspective of devotion—what the Vaiṣṇavas call Madhurya Bhava—would later influence the portrayal of female characters throughout his literary career, moving them from archetypes of virtue to “complex subjects of human desire” (42). Tagore's work during this time also helped bring back the respect for Vaiṣṇava literature among the city's upper class. Tagore published *Padaratnabali* in 1885 with the help of Srischandra Majumdar. This was the scholarly input that focused on the poetic value of the padas rather than their ritualistic use. He purposefully left out the traditional *Gourachandrika*, which are the songs that introduce Chaitanya in his

writings. This showed that he was moving toward an aesthetic appreciation that could go beyond sectarian lines.

The *Jīvan Devatā* and the Synthesis of Baul Mysticism

In the 1890s, when Tagore had matured spiritually, it led to the creation of his most original idea, the *Jīvan Devatā* or God of Life. This idea came to him while he was living in Shilaidaha, where he had to take care of the family estates and got to know the rural life of Bengal very well. Tagore combined the “threads of Vaiṣṇava love” (Mondal 1) with the “freedom of Baul mysticism” (Mondal 1) and the non-dualism of the Upaniṣads in that time. The Bauls, a group of wandering minstrels who often lived on the fringes of both Hindu and Muslim society, believed that God lives inside the human body. Their main goal was to worship the “unattainable God residing within the human form” (Tagore 7), who is also known as the “Man of my heart” (Moner Manush). Tagore discovered a significant connection between the Baul’s internalized divinity and his own *Jīvan Devatā*. Lalon Fakir’s “khachar bhitor ochin pakhi” which translates to “the unknown bird in the cage” influenced him (Mondal 1). Tagore understood that the Baul’s rejection of organized religion and their quest for spiritual freedom reflected the core of the Vaiṣṇava experience. It was devoid of the limitations imposed by Puranic mythology. This synthesis enabled Tagore to transmute the personal God of the Vaiṣṇavas into a more abstract yet intimate “original poet within” (Tagore 7) that directed his creative and spiritual existence. Tagore’s synthesis promoted “liberty through engagement” with the world’s pleasures, in contrast to traditional asceticism, which aimed for liberation through the denial of the world (7).

Tagore learned from Vaiṣṇava theology that human love could be turned into divine love and believed that God “needs to rely on the human soul for the fulfillment of His love” (Thakur 609). Tagore’s philosophy was built on the idea that the finite and the infinite depend on each other. In his poem “*Jīvan Devatā*” from the collection *Chitra* (1896), he talks to his deepest self and treats the divine as a friend and lover who is “both the poet himself and a power beyond him” (Tagore 7). *Madhurya*, or sweetness is what makes this relationship special, not *Aiśvarya*, or majesty. Tagore’s *Jīvan Devatā* is the “Lover” who plays the flute. This shows how beautiful both nature and man are.

***Gitanjali* and the “Religion of Man”**

In *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*, the figure of God is unnamed and formless, yet the poems are infused with the themes of “love, longing, and spiritual surrender” (Halder 2). A detailed examination of particular songs in *Gitanjali* demonstrates the significant impact of Vaiṣṇava motifs reinterpreted through a contemporary humanistic perspective. The first song from *Gitanjali* is about a flute and the endless life. “Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure” introduces the central metaphor of the human body as a “frail vessel” and the soul as a “little flute of a reed” (Tagore 10). In Vaiṣṇava philosophy, the flute is the instrument of Kṛṣṇa's will, which breathes life and melody into a lifeless object. Tagore reinterprets the doctrine of transmigration—the emptying and filling of the vessel—not as a burden of karma but as a divine līlā (play). The “immortal touch” that dissolves individual limits into “joy ineffable”. The soul is immortal because it is the medium through which the infinite expresses itself. The flute “represents both the instrument of divine expression and the soul's yearning for transcendence” (10). He writes in the fifth song offering, “I have come to the brink of eternity, from which nothing can vanish—no hope, no happiness, no vision of a face seen through tears” (10). This embodies the Vaiṣṇavite concept of *Viraha*, that is separation and the soul's “yearning for union” (10).

The eleventh song is about a tiller and a path-maker. “Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!” represents a radical reinterpretation of the Chaitanya movement's anti-ritualistic stance. Traditionally, Vaiṣṇavism emphasized on direct congregational chanting. Tagore, however, argues that God is not found in the “lonely dark corner of a temple” but in the “dusty soil” with the “tiller” and the “pathmaker”. The theological implication is that the divine is “bound with us all for ever” through the “bonds of creation”. This reflects the Acintya-bhedābheda principle where the creator is simultaneously distinct from and non-distinct from the creation. By sanctifying manual labor and identifying the divine with the “lowliest of the poor,” Tagore transforms the personal God of Vaiṣṇavism into the “Universal Man,” suggesting that spiritual realization is found through social concern and secular action. This shows that he values “heartfelt devotion over formal worship” (Halder 2).

In the thirty-sixth lyric, which echoes Baul philosophy, Tagore finds the divine presence where “the tiller is tilling the hard ground” (Tagore 20). This suggests that spirituality is an “intensification of life achieved

through social concern” (Halder 2). The forty-eighth lyric talks about God as the “divine orchestrator” who “brings the poet into new relationships” (3). The fiftieth lyric is about a beggar and a king. The narrative of the beggar who offers a “least little grain of corn” to the King of kings explores the paradox of spiritual sacrifice (Tagore 59). This is a poetic exploration of Prapatti, which refers to surrender and the persistent presence of ego. The King’s act of seeking alms from the beggar is a Leela, or divine play—God plays tricks to test the devotion and surrender of His devotees. The image of the grain changing into gold represents the spiritual worth of even the smallest act of philanthropy. Nevertheless, the poet’s crying with sorrow towards the end of the day demonstrates a tragic realization— “I had had the heart to give thee my all.” This is reminiscent of the divine association between Kṛṣṇa and Sudama, where it is not the gift but the entire heart that is required by God. Tagore prays to the Lord, “Strike at the root of penury”, within his heart, which carries roots from the Vaiṣṇavite concept where ego and other worldly longings were overcome for proximity to the Divine (Tagore 45).

The one hundred and third song is about the final submission of the self to the feet of the divine. The culmination of Tagore’s spiritual journey is found in this song, “In one salutation to thee, my God” (Tagore 112). This lyric represents the ultimate step of the *Navadha Bhakti* or the nine-fold devotion to the Lord as per Vaiṣṇavism—*Atma Nivedana*, or total self-offering. The imagery of the “rain-cloud of July hung low” and the “homesick cranes flying back to their mountain nests” depicts the soul’s final return to its “eternal home.” This salutation is not an act of merging where the individual is lost according to Advaita monism, but a “conscious yielding” where the diverse strains of the soul’s songs flow into a “sea of silence.” It is the realization of the *Jīvan Devatā*—the “God of Life” who is both the innermost self and the power beyond it.

Tagore here effectively bridges the gap between the formless Brahman of the Upaniṣads and the personal lover of the Vaiṣṇava tradition. He rejects the “traditional conception of emancipation” through sainthood or world-denial, asserting instead that liberation lies in love. The relationship he develops with the divine is egalitarian rather than hierarchical; the “divine needs the human no less than the human the divine” for the fulfillment of Love. This “friendly union” between humanity and the divine becomes the basis for Tagore’s “Religion of Man”. Tagore’s *Gitanjali* does not just promote “formless” monotheism, but rather a “Personalized Infinite”. While the Brāhmo faith was strictly iconoclastic, Tagore’s “Religion of Man” uses the personal

emotional framework of Vaiṣṇavism to make that formless Absolute accessible. Tagore turned the Bengali tradition into a universal “Religion of Man”. He contended that “salvation is not complete absorption into God but absolute dedication to humanity through love, service, and joy” (Ilame 268). His ideas about the “Universal Man” and “One World” came directly from the Vaiṣṇava belief that God is present in everyone. This divine viewpoint posits that spiritual freedom constitutes not freedom from action but freedom within action. Tagore did not believe in the non-dualistic idea of salvation, which meant completely merging with Brahman and losing one's existence like a drop of water in the ocean but in love and service. Tagore critiqued traditional world-denying asceticism for its tendency to overlook the spiritual value of temporal life and social engagement.

Musical Aesthetics and the Evolution of Kīrtana

One can really feel the revival of Vaiṣṇavism in the tunes of Tagore, known as Rabindra Sangeet. Tagore was deeply influenced by the “theology of sound” that Vaiṣṇava scholars wrote about in the 1700s. He understood that music and song were more than just art; they were important for spiritual growth because they connected the finite world to the infinite. His association with the “Sahajiyā” tradition made him appreciate and enjoy the unassuming melodies of kīrtana and the rhythm that evolved in the conference at Kheturi in the 1500s. Tagore effectively merged the styles of Manoharsahī and Garanhāṭī kīrtana, blending “rāga-based art music” with folk traditions of the region (Williams 183). Tagore revived this rich tradition by drawing on the 18th-century conceptions about bhakti singing by Narahari Chakravarti and ideas such as ālāpa and tāla. The musical growth was marked by the use of anibaddha, which is “unconstrained in rhythm, meter, and sections.” This allowed the music to “abstractly elaborate on the melody” (Williams 182) instead of the restrictive lyrics that are characteristic of traditional hymns. This tradition fitted in perfectly with the “sweet style of excited passion” (182). As a result, Tagore changed kīrtana from a harsh sound to a more refined way of “singing in tune with God” (181).

In the Vaiṣṇava faith, Kṛṣṇa's flute is the perfect symbol of the divine call that pulls the soul away from worldly things. To Tagore, this “musical idea” was a way to show the divine essence that lives in the human heart. His musical journey constituted an endless quest for a melody that could convey his innermost feelings

about the 'Man of my heart' (Mondal 1). He used the simple rhythms and poetic quality of Baul music to make pieces that kept the unique “Rabindra Baul” feel. This synthesis showed that the line between religious music and classical art was not clear-cut. It showed that spiritual expression can come from combining voice, gesture, and movement in a way that flows.

Conclusion

The resurgence of Vaiṣṇavism in Tagore's oeuvre indicates cultural and spiritual evolution. First, Chaitanya's work in the sixteenth century made religion more democratic. This set the stage for Tagore's work in the nineteenth century, which led to social reform in the modern era. Tagore's revival indicates that for a religious tradition to endure in modernity, it must evolve from a “sacred” distinct domain to the “human” as the paramount locus of the divine. Secondly, Tagore's work asserts that beauty and art are not mere embellishments but are soteriological—they serve as the means of salvation. Tagore made spiritual realization possible for people who could no longer believe in Puranic literalism by turning traditional devotional feelings into a modern aesthetic experience. To bring Vaiṣṇavism back to life in a modern setting, the abstract Upaniṣadic Brahman had to be made compatible with the personal God of the devotees. Tagore's idea of *Jīvan Devatā* helped bring these two ideas together. It gave the modern mind a faith that was both intellectually challenging and emotionally satisfying. The Rādhā figure's enduring significance as a “muse of both sacred and secular artistic productions” underscores Tagore's capacity to discern universal motifs within regional mythology (Chakrabarty 42). This indicates that regional symbols, when liberated from their sectarian limitations, can transform into potent instruments for global identity and intercultural engagement.

Rabindranath Tagore's revival of Vaiṣṇavism constitutes one of the most significant spiritual and literary accomplishments of the contemporary period. He did not only repeat the “frenzied outbursts of delirium” of the past, but also, he turned the “flood of love” (Majumder 5) that swept through medieval Bengal into a modern, universal brotherhood and spiritual freedom. Tagore wrote by combining the devotion and the mystical freedom of the Bauls and the philosophy of the Upaniṣads. His legacy consists in the claim that the Infinite is discovered

not in the negation of life but in its complete engagement. Tagore's revival of Vaiṣṇava thought and aesthetics made sure that Bengal's spiritual heritage would continue to enrich the minds of people all over the world. He showed that “death and life are the decree of Heaven,” but that love is the most important virtue that connects everyone within the “Four Seas” as brothers (Shen 378).

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