

Rabindranath Tagore and His Consonance with Buddhism: A Formative Impression

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore, the renowned Indian poet, philosopher, and polymath, was influenced by various philosophical and spiritual traditions throughout his life. While Tagore was born into a Hindu family and was deeply connected to Hindu culture and philosophy, he also had a significant engagement with Buddhism which left a noticeable impact on his thinking. Buddhist philosophy for him, worked as an answer to the question of suffering. Buddha preached that the solution of the problem lies in the Sutra of Four Noble Truths and the Sutra of Eightfold Path.

Tagore's writings frequently explore the common humanity that transcends religious, cultural, and national boundaries. He revered humanistic principles of Buddhism which cast a deep influence on his psyche. As a result of this influence, he derived the themes of many of his literary works from the Buddhist Jataka Tales.

Rabindranath Tagore, a multi-faceted genius made significant contributions to the field of literature, including the genre of dance drama. Tagore wrote a number of dance dramas, blending poetry, music, and dance to create a unique form of artistic expression. These dance dramas often conveyed profound philosophical and spiritual themes. Tagore has incorporated many Buddhist tales and historical incidents in his literary corpus. He condemned the narrow and discriminating sectarianism present in the form of class and caste system and the rigid traditional and religious rules imposing social isolation and slavery. He disseminated this message through his works like *Chandalika*, *Malini*, *Visarjan*, *Natir Puja* etc.

KEYWORDS

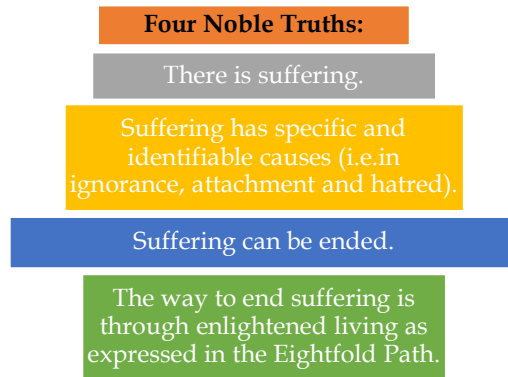
Humanistic, Philosophical, Buddhist, Spiritual, Religious, Psyche, Dance Drama.

1. Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore, the renowned Indian poet, philosopher, and sage, was influenced by various philosophical and spiritual traditions throughout his life. Tagore's writings frequently explore the common humanity that transcends religious, cultural, and national boundaries. He revered humanistic principles of Buddhism which cast a deep influence on his psyche. As a result of this influence, he derived the themes of many of his literary works from the Buddhist Jataka Tales.

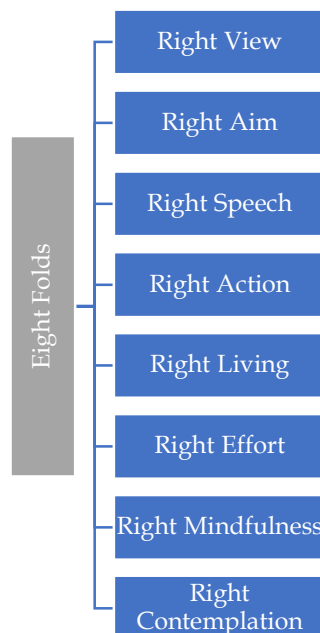
While Tagore was born into a Hindu family and was deeply connected to Hindu culture and philosophy, he also had a significant engagement with Buddhism, which left a noticeable impact on his thinking. Buddhist philosophy worked as an answer to the question of suffering. Buddha preached that the solution of this problem lies in the Sutra of Four Noble Truths and the Sutra of Eightfold Path. These Four Noble Truths can be enlisted as:

- (1) There is suffering.
- (2) Suffering has specific and identifiable causes (i.e. in ignorance, attachment and hatred)
- (3) Suffering can be ended.
- (4) The way to end suffering is through enlightened living as expressed in the Eightfold Path.



Buddha established that the principal reason behind human suffering is having ignorance and acute yearning for the fulfillment of selfish urge. The salvation lies in the practice of Dharma and the path of spiritualism. The Eightfold Path comprises:

- (1) Right view
- (2) Right aim
- (3) Right speech
- (4) Right action
- (5) Right living
- (6) Right effort
- (7) Right mindfulness
- (8) Right contemplation



Universal love and compassion for fellow beings is the key to destroy the barricades that separate individual from individual. Tagore's family has played a great role in shaping up his spiritual and religious inclinations. Another significant influence

which worked on the psyche of young Rabindranath was the movement to revive Buddhism after 2000 years on the soil of its genesis by Anagrika Dharmapala, the renowned Buddhist from Sri Lanka and the founder of the Mahabodhi society in the city of Calcutta. To further enhance his understanding on Buddhist literature and philosophy, Tagore extensively read *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* written by the renowned Indologist Rajendralal

Mitra.

Buddhism emphasizes universal compassion and the interconnectedness of all living beings. Tagore's philosophy, often characterized by universalism and humanism, resonated with these Buddhist principles. Tagore's writings frequently explore the common humanity that transcends religious, cultural, and national boundaries. He revered humanistic principles of Buddhism which cast a deep influence on his psyche. As a result of this influence, he derived the themes of many of his literary works from the Buddhist Jataka Tales. These themes were based on his reading of the famous book by Rajendralal Mitra, which also sourced the anecdotes and legends about Lord Buddha found in his writings. The other Buddhist influences on Tagore's mind can be listed as 'Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism' (1907) by Teitaro Suzuki, the Sanskrit epic dealing with the life and stories of Buddha- 'Buddhacarita' by Ashvaghosha, 'Light of Asia (1879) by the British poet and journalist Edwin Arnold, 'The Awakening of Asia (1905) and 'The Ideals of the East' (1903) by the Japanese visitor Kakuzo Okakura.

Tagore never delved into the theoretical aspect of the Buddhist philosophy, nor did he dwell over the concept of 'suffering'- 'Dukkha'. He just assimilated the remedial aspect of the Buddhism and propagated the humanistic philosophy of Buddha as an elixir to the malaise of the humans. He educates the people that the world is drunk with the opium of hatred, jealousy, selfishness and rivalry. In a state like this, the teachings of Buddha are the only consolation to the aching soul. Tagore was immensely impressed by Buddha's universal love for humanity and criticized the discriminatory social setup or the all-pervasive caste system, which can only cripple the healthy, equalitarian social structure. He condemned the narrow and discriminating slavery. He disseminated this message through his works like *Chandalika*, *Malini*, *Visarjan*, *Natir Puja* etc.

Buddhism teaches the importance of non-attachment and detachment from material possessions and desires. Tagore's emphasis on the spiritual value of detachment and his criticism of excessive materialism in society resonate with these Buddhist teachings. Admitting to the deep influence of Buddhism after Upanishads on himself, Tagore exclaims in the 'Preface to Sadhana', his first English book of religious essays:

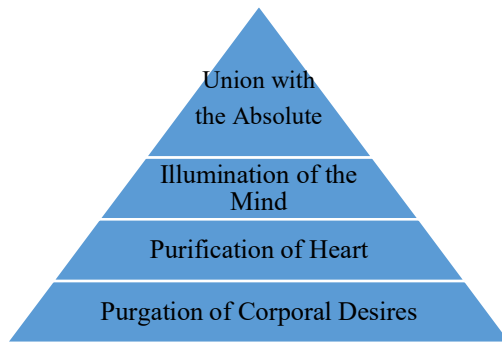
"To me the verses of the Upanishads and the teachings of Buddha have ever been things of the spirit, and therefore endowed with boundless vital growth, and I have used them, both in my own life and in my preaching, as being distinct with individual meaning for me, as for others, and waiting for their confirmation, my own special testimony, which must have its value because of its individuality." (p. viii.)

Tagore, thus acknowledging his affinity with Buddhism, claims it to be the eternal fountain head of his spiritual inclinations. *Abhisar* (Love's Sojourn), *Mulya Prapti* (Receipt of Price), *Sreshtha Bhiksha* (Best Gift of Begging), *Mastak Vikray* (Sale of Head) etc. are some his poems which resonate with Buddhist themes.

He also showcased the glory of renunciation and the eternal merits of Buddhist philosophy through the plays like *Parishodh* (Repayment of Loan), *Malini*, *Natir Puja* (The Dancing Girl's Worship), *Dinadan* (Poor Gift), *Chandalika*. His novel *Ghare Baire* (Home and World) and three dance dramas – *Chandalika*, *Malini*, and *Natir Puja* are inspired by the Buddhist tales.

The teachings of Buddha exercised an important influence on the spiritual outlook of Tagore. He found them logical, cogent and down-to-earth. Buddha became his ideal and permanent source of his inspiration for spirituality. Buddhism encourages individuals to seek enlightenment through inner spiritual experience rather than depending only on the external rituals. Tagore's own spiritual journey and his due emphasis on the significance of personal experience and realization in one's spiritual pursuit line up with this aspect of Buddhist philosophy. This spiritual quest, or which can be conveniently termed as the mystic path, is likened to a pilgrimage pervasively. The spiritual pilgrim or the mystic has to tread the winding heights along the dictated path of absolute knowledge and discover the unknown territories on his way to the union with the God, through his personal spiritual experience.

The 'Union with the Ultimate' is a process of four stages. The first stage involves the 'purgation of corporal desires. The Buddhist teachings insist on setting our soul free from the bondages of bodily urges and desires. The soul should not be enslaved by the physical yearnings. The second stage is the stage of 'purification', i. e. the cleansing of heart and will power. The third stage comprises of the 'illumination of the mind'. In the illuminative stage, there is a distinct awareness of the divine presence in contrast to the consciousness of the self. In further stages, the conscious state starts dwindling and merging with the unconscious state. The demarcation between the two, i. e. the subject and the object of contemplation, keeps dissolving, until it culminates in the union of the mystic's self with the Ultimate or the Absolute. Such mystical and spiritual experiences are personal and universal simultaneously.



Buddhism often highlights the interconnectedness of all living things and promotes harmony with nature. Tagore had profound connections with nature. When young Rabi (Rabindranath Tagore) reached Bolpur along with his father, enroute to the North, the serenity and quietude of the place filled the mind and heart of the young child. To describe his first visit to Bolpur, Tagore writes in 'Reminiscences':

"It was evening when we reached Bolpur. As I got into the palanquin, I closed my eyes. I wanted to preserve the whole of the wonderful visions to be unfolded before my waking eyes in the morning light. The freshness of the experience would be spoilt, I feared, by incomplete glimpses caught in the vagueness of the dusk." (p. 80.)

In the years to come, Bolpur became the epicenter of many of his literary activities and acquired immense significance as Visva-Bharati was also established here.

As a child, Tagore felt an intimate bond with Nature. Nilesh Arvind Tare writes:

"When the Maharshi was away, and Rabi was left to himself, his favourite pastime was to gaze out of window and watch the panorama of life as it unfolded itself on the streets, in the garden, and on the banks of the pool where bathers came for their morning dips. The world, and the activities of its inhabitants, had already acquired in Rabi's eyes the qualities of mystery and enchantment." (p.4)

His mystic attachment with nature got further enhanced when at the age of twelve, he got the opportunity to see snow-covered Himalayas in the company of his father.

After having a brief stay in Europe, Tagore, on his return to India, was sent to Shelidah by his father to take care of the family estates. This event played a significant role in the life and literary sojourn of Tagore. The rural setting of the place and the serene natural surroundings set his imagination and creativeness on fire. V. S. Naravane inscribes:

"He spent much of his time on a boat, sailing unhurriedly on the Padma River. Life on the river gave him a sense of flow and continuity and the absence of any diversions enabled him to concentrate on writing." (p. 20.) His stay in Shelidah proved to be quite a productive period. *Godoy Galad* (Wrong from the Start), a light vein comedy, *Chitrangada*, the tale of the warrior princess from the Mahabharata epic, many short stories, a great number of poems published in Sonar Tari are some of the instances of his creative outburst at Shelidah. Tagore's deep connection with nature and his depiction of the beauty and interconnectedness of the natural world in his writings resonate with Buddhist themes.

Buddhism historically rejected the caste system, emphasizing the equality of all individuals. Tagore, who was critical of social hierarchies and injustices, shared this sentiment with Buddha. Tagore always denounced separatism, evil caste system and such malpractices prevalent in the society. In his lecture *Buddhadeb* delivered in 1935, he made himself very clear:

"Among all classes (varna), among all castes, the cruel stupidity of unholy separatedness in the name of religion has made this earth muddy with blood; nowadays at every step humanity is insulted by a mutual hatred that is far from more severe than violence against each other. Today, in this unfortunate country soiled by fraternal hatred, I anxiously yearn for this message of him who proclaimed friendliness (*maitri*) to all living beings to be the path to liberation." (sic)

Conclusion:

Tagore's consonance with Buddhism is palpable. However, it is vital to note that his intellectual and spiritual journey was heterogenous. He drew inspiration from various sources, such as, Upanishads, Vaishnavism, Buddhism, Western philosophy, Christianity, and mysticism. Tagore's amalgamation of sundry stimulus contributed to the unique appeal of his philosophy and creative writings. V. S. Naravane very correctly opines,

"The noble idealism of the Upanishads, the compassion and wisdom of the Buddha, the rationalism of

Western thought, the love of the Vaishnavas, the humanism of Jesus, the inwardness of the great mystic poets of all ages and countries, everything had its place in Rabindranath's world-view and his way of life." (p. 9)
All these varied influences not only shaped up his own perspective about the world but also offered a magnanimous blend which made a great poet like Tagore go global.

Rabindranath Tagore, a multi-faceted genius made significant contributions to the field of literature, including the genre of dance drama. Tagore wrote a number of dance dramas, blending poetry, music, and dance to create a unique form of artistic expression. These dance dramas often conveyed profound philosophical and spiritual themes. Tagore has incorporated many Buddhist tales and historical incidents in his literary corpus. He denounced the strict traditional and religious laws that impose social exclusion and servitude, as well as the limited and discriminatory conservatism that exists in the shape of the class and caste systems. He propagated this message by his works like *Chandalika*, *Malini*, *Visarjan*, *Natir Puja* and many more.

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