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## Vaishnava Ideology in Rabindranath Tagore’s Eco-poetry and its philosophical significance in human-nature relationship

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### Abstract

“In the infinite dualism of death and life there is a harmony. We know that the life of a soul which is finite in its expression and infinite in its principle, must go through the portals of death in its journey to realise the infinite.”

- Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore, India’s renaissance man in whom tradition and culture blended and evolved in the course of his long life due to the exposure to a wide range of ideas and lifestyles both from east and west. We get to appraise the fact these ideas absorbed, modified, supplemented and shaped in his poetic consciousness. Many of his later writings had an influence of Vaishnava Philosophy and Literature. In *Bhanusimher Padaboli*, one can trace his literary concepts having an influence of Vaishnava lyrics. It is the explicit compilation that showcase Tagore in relation to the *Krishna-Chaitanya* religio-literary tradition of Bengal. He creatively synthesized central themes of Vaishnava poetic words such as *madhurya*, *viraha*, *abhisara*, *bhakti*, *lila*, *sadhana* and *shakti* in his masterpiece plays, poems, paintings and musical compositions giving all of them a mystical human garb.

The paper initially engages with his family’s Vaishnava affinities. It then assesses in what ways and to what degrees underlying characteristics of Bengali Vaishnava sanctity and aesthetics reflected in the Eco-poetry of Tagore. Finally, it emphasizes the striking similarities between Vaishnava *Soul Force* and Tagore’s *Maanvika Bhuma* points out the philosophical significance in human-nature relationship.

**Key Words:** *Bengal Vaisnavism, madhurya, viraha, abhisara, bhakti, lila, sadhana, shakti, Eco-poetry, Soul Force and Maanvika Bhuma*

## **Introduction**

Philosophy is the systematic study of ideas and issues; a reasoned pursuit of fundamental truths; a quest for a comprehensive understanding of the world, a study of principles of conduct, and much more. Philosophy also contributes uniquely to the understanding of other academic pursuits and fields of inquiry. Environmental Philosophy is one such discipline in it, that studies the moral relationship of human beings along with the value and moral status of, the environment and its fellow beings. Approaching the third decade of this millennium, our world faces new concerns, particularly, environmental and economic, which share one common property – they are global, they affect everybody. The human-nature association is very unique and dynamic. Today’s outlook with regard to this interface, asserts that there is lack of forethought and unsustainability in our perspective. So, rethinking about human-nature relationship fruitfully shall help us to shift our quests from intellectual literates to eco-literates. Especially in India, a place-based writing that has sacred landscape accounts about pilgrimages, health, geographies, travel through the forest, oral histories and philosophical texts resourcefully supply to give rise to a vision in all of us. Howarth suggests, all of these contain within them descriptions and representations of the natural world in some or the other way.

Indian sub-continent is surrounded with its bio-diverse flora and fauna, many seers, poets, thinkers and writers of pre-modern era had close interface between the seasonal sequences and human activities. They intelligibly chose to include descriptions of nature and its landscape in their compositions. These writings also consist of account to issues around conceptualization of nature on the basis of gender, as benevolent, or as dangerous, which continue to influence our perception of nature as understood today. The poets of ancient past had a profound influence on modern Indian writers, leaders and common people. Vaishnavism, a theological-religious branch of Indian Classical studies, is one of those major sources which assumed a critical part in enhancing the literary and poetic brilliance in Rabindranath Tagore. The tradition consisting of the core idea of Vaishnava thought and philosophy as the subject matter of poetry, which was first begun by Jayadeva and carried

forward by later Vaishnava lyrical poets, reached its culmination with Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. An intense analysis of Tagore’s lyrics and melodies will uncover the way how Vaishnava theology has been woven through them. That is why Vaishnava scholars like Hari Das, Harekrishna Mukhopadhaya and many others have acknowledged Tagore as a true Vaishnava.

## I

### **Tagore’s family’s Vaishnava affinities**

The integral aspect of Bengal Vaishnava lyrics sung as well as chanted in the evening hours at Tagore’s home, locate his family members spatially, temporally and spiritually, investing with certain responsibilities at a particular time. Tagore’s grandfather, Dwarakanath’s unorthodox views and an inclination to patronise major cultural and educational institutions was responsible for laying the foundation of enlightened lineage. His father, Debendranath was a master of the Upanishads and played a great role in the education and cultivation of the intellectual faculties in his children. Tagore’s brothers, Dwijendranath, Satyendranath and Jyotirindranath were genius minds themselves who developed in Tagore interest for poetry, philosophy, mathematics, music, painting, playwriting among many other things. On one hand, brothers as elder siblings played formative role in shaping Tagore’s dynamic personality; while on the other hand women folks of the household too uniquely play, as role models in enabling Tagore evolve and attain maturity in every walk of his life. Mother Sarada Devi, a pious soul, who cultivated the habit of reading religious works in Bengali and opened avenues to engage with Upanishadic teachings, also conveyed practical values through mythological stories and popular narratives. Sister Swarnakumari Devi, first Bengali woman fiction-writer jointly with Tagore wrote, produced their own plays along with fully composed music. Sisters-in-law Jnanadanandini, Kadambari Devi through their sophisticated elegance shaped the artistic style

in Tagore. All of them in their own ways assimilate in Tagore, to reflect the integration of the human and natural worlds.

Jyoti Ignace Tete writes that what Tagore has learned from the Vaishnava theology is the process through which human love can be transformed into divine and also the way through which God can be united with human being-

“The possibility of transforming human love into divine love held by Tagore must have been derived from Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism taught Tagore the message of friendly union between God and human being.”

The Gaudiya sampradaya represent Radha and Krishna through their lyrical hymns, the beauty of the divine couple in their idyllic transcendent realm. All such expressions of the Vaishnava poets are the consequences of their immense devotional sentiments, which give the Vaishnava convention in Bengal an emphatic as well as an aesthetic quality. It is this soothing combination of the literary refinement, simple expression and aesthetic excellence that attracted Tagore towards Vaishnava poetry. As Tagore himself has admitted that Vaishnava poetry is free from the restraint of any fixed literary convention and therefore they exhibit a degree of freedom in their way of expressing human emotions simply and effectively.

What is striking in Tagore is his admiration to Jayadeva, Vidyapati and Chandidas’ enchanting compositions. In his autobiography *Jivansmriti*, Tagore has admitted that during his early years it was a volume of poems by the Maithili poet Vidyapati found in the family library that initiated young Tagore's interest towards Vaishnava lyrics. He was overwhelmed by the expression and rhythm of the Maithili poet that he, at an age of twenty, composed a few verses in impersonation of the medieval Vaishnava verse. These lyrics were published under the title of ‘*Bhanusingher Padavali*’ (Songs of Bhanusingha). They breathe out a true Vaishnava spirit to such an extent that scholars often trace in them clear impressions of the Vaishnava poets like

Jayadeva, Chandidasa and Vidyapati. About that discovery of Vidyapati’s lyrics, Rabindranath later wrote:

“Fortunately for me a collection of old lyrical poems composed by the poets of the Vaishnava sect came to my hand when I was young. I became aware of some underlying idea deep in the obvious meaning of these love poems. ....The Vaishnava poet sings of the Lover who has his flute which, with its different stops, gives out the varied notes of beauty and love that are in Nature and Man”.

Tagore’s family’s Vaishnava affinities with Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition contain potential sources of knowledge about Bengal Vaishnava ideology on *loving devotion* or the *Prema-Bhakti* or the emotional service of love and devotion as a means of spiritual realization, it is the ultimate goal that an aspirant aims at. Tagore was influenced by this idea of *Prema-Bhakti*- a type of devotion that perhaps enabled him to express the creed of Vaishnava philosophy in his songs and lyrics, in the portrayal of characters in his short stories and plays with precision. For centuries many visionaries have talked about One Earth, perhaps echoing Rabindranath Tagore’s thoughts about planetary citizenship, the main stream of life has the world into a condition where the future seems perilous. Today, everyone knows that things must change and philosophical thought finds itself struggling to create within its domain something that emulates and advances the new spirit in all of us.

## II

### **The underlying characteristics of Bengali Vaishnava sanctity and aesthetics reflected in the Eco-poetry of Tagore**

Tagore was simply a genius as he was able to take the art of writing to describe something that is difficult for an ordinary individual to describe. Love as a concept is always interpreted in the physical sense by most of the poets. But Tagore was able to take it beyond that level. In conversation with E. G. Thompson Tagore once said that what attracted him towards the Vaishnava lyrics were their melodious nature and the pictorial quality. It was the art of synthesising the two that not only amazed him but also provided him the structure to compose his own compositions. As he said- "I found in the Vaishnava

artists melodious development and pictures startling and they gave me frame. They make many examinations in meter. And afterward there was the intensity of their symbolism." While inspecting the Vaishnava element in Tagore's works C.F. Andrews has commented that he chose with specific reason Vaishnava religious literature as the source of inspiration. He was so engrossed by the poetic quality and graceful nature of the Vaishnava 'padavali' that it 'afterwards remained intimately dear to him.'

Vaishnava poets through their love lyrics have tried to exhibit the idea that the finite cannot be separated from the infinite as they are not only eternally bound by love but also are equally eager to be in the company of each other. It is the expression of this secret relationship between the finite and the infinite that bestows in Vaishnava literature *Madhurya* or the sense of delicacy. Tagore is inspired by this idea of the vaishnava poets and like them he has tried to weave a firm organic relation between the Absolute and the finites. Tagore portrays that an authentic human being is inseparably related to the flourishing of the natural world. Nature contains a spiritual wealth, a fund of emotional energy and harmony with it evokes our aesthetic appreciation because it gives us spiritual joy and fulfils the demand of the surplus or spiritual component in us. Romanticism in Tagore's nature poems commences with the “*Wild Flower*” (*Ban Phul*) that follows romantic naturalism to reach the conventional position that the city is the home of evil and suffering, and nature the abode of peace and purity. The first lines portray:

I crave not for learning,  
nor Knowledge of man, or his world.  
I would rather be a wild flower.

Return to nature in “*Wild Flower*” results as the process of healing because the impact of the modern ecological crises leads to a state of agony as it inflicts only pain, disregard and contempt for nature and its elements.

Similarly, Vaishnavites believe in the idea of the *Lila* of God for they presume God to be the supreme master of the universe and the entire cosmos as His play-ground. They view “the world as real with its various colours and combination. They put emphasis on a firm organic relation between God and human

being. God is everything and all actions of human being should be dedicated to Him.” They also consider Him as ‘Perfect Man’, to whom nothing is impossible. This humanistic conception of the divine has been eulogized by Tagore. Like the Vaishnava verse composers, he also believes that the human *lila* of Krishna is the best among all *lilas*. He firmly believes that God Himself is Self-sufficient, therefore neither does God desire for anything nor can His action be motivated by any external force. The world is created by him for His *Lila* and we all, finite souls (*jivatma*), are eagerly waiting to see him play in His own created field. As Tagore writes in Gitanjali or Songs Offerings- “You will play in me that is why I have come to this world.”

Further, the Vaishnava *Sadhana* always craves for bridging the gap between God and the finite. In Tagore’s humanism one can trace the tendency of thirsts upon the theistic, personal aspect of God and to the absolutistic aspect of God or ‘Brahman’ as he is well aware of the idea that unless God is drawn near and dear to oneself, it will not be possible for him to love the indifferent Absolute from distance. That is why Tagore has tried to show that God exists within us but in order to visualise Him we need to look inside-

My eyes fail to find you, as you reside within the eyes.  
You aren't knowledgeable to the heart, as you secretly stay within.

The most significant aspect of Vaishnava philosophy is the eternal bondage between *paramatma* and the devotees. The lover by his impassioned reflection not just tries to envision and make the entire Vrindavan Lila of Krishna live before him, but also, he goes into imaginatively, and filling the role of a dearest of Krishna he encounters vicariously the energetic sentiments which are so clearly accounted in the writing. There are several songs of Tagore where he has acknowledged the supreme Lord as ‘*Paramakarunāmaya*’ or Absolute Merciful. He has also conceptualised God as ‘*Lilamaya*’ and says, “Out of thy own kindness you make yourself small and come to my small house.”

In Vaishnava writing another imperative perspective is *Viraha* or the throbs of partition. Vaishnavites believe that not exclusively is the human soul of Radha anxious to meet the perfect, however foremost

soul likewise awaits, for the human soul to come to him. He additionally endures and experiences numerous excruciating encounters for meeting the human soul. These strings of separation experienced by Radha are agonizing yet they are sweet for her since she knows, after *Viraha*, a double gratifying *communion* (Milan) will take place. Tagore has used this Vaishnava perception and boldly declares that God needs to depend on human soul for the satisfaction of his adoration- “God has to rely on human soul for the fulfilment of his love.” He, too conceives the *Viraha* is sweet, and that is why he does not even hesitate to say -“My *Viraha* has turned out to be sweet in this night.” Similarly, Tagore portrays in Gitanjali that:

“He [God] is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking the stones”.

Tagore has used this Vaishnava perception of *Viraha* in the eighteenth song of Gitanjali-

Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens.  
Ah, love, why dost thou let me wait outside at the door all alone?  
In the busy moments of the noontide work I am with the crowd,  
but on this dark, lonely day it is only for thee that I hope.

Further comes the idea of *Abhisara* as one of the popular subject matters for the Vaishnava lyrical poets. *Abhisara* refers to those lyrics where the descriptions of ‘Journey of Love’ of Radha for Krishna are beautifully outlined. There are several verse composers like Gobindadasa, Chandidasa, who wrote numerous lyrics on Radha’s risky journey in order to meet the Supreme. “But the path of the *Abhisara*”, as opined by Dr. Pradhan, “is made so impassable and Radha is described as so self-forgetful that we cannot be contented by understanding those songs as the descriptions of the ‘Journey of Love’ of the heroine for the hero. There it seems that the Poet’s purpose will be served if we imagine the hero as ‘infinite Brahman’ and the heroin as ‘individual soul’”. Tagore was highly impressed by the idea of *Abhisara*. He has given more importance to *Abhisara* ‘than to the conception of Union’.

In the following lyric we find a brilliant description of Radha’s *Abhisara*. Watching the intense gathering of the dark clouds in the sky, Radha has been constantly made aware by her friends (sakhis)

to be careful and not go to meet Krishna, but Radha, who has desired her entire life for the sake of her Supreme Lord, determines to pursue her mission-

Dark rain clouds gathered all over the monsoon sky  
In the dark of the night  
How do I go through the forest  
Being a helpless lady (translations by Sam Tumblr)

It is so because being a true Vaishnavite he has realized that like Radha, a human soul is always in search for the path of divine. Therefore, the journey of the ‘Jivatma’ is nothing but *Abhisara* in order for the union with Paramatma. Besides Tagore is also of the opinion that the ultimate truth of one’s life should be to know the Eternal. As he says in one of his poems that the real pleasure of him lies in walking through the path- the path that can lead him to get the momentary touch of his dearest through the beauties of nature and love of man. And also, Tagore celebrates the idea of liberty. He visualizes a world:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
(Tagore, 1912)*

Here it is noteworthy to mention that it is true that Tagore's love poetry shows the influence of Vaishnava love poetry, which centres round the love of Radha and Krishna, but his treatment of it is entirely his own. Tagore’s idealistic conviction is stated in his book the *Religion of Man* that, “what we call nature is not a philosophical abstraction, not cosmos, but what is revealed to human as nature...”

In his preface to *Banabani*, a collection of some of his finest short stories on nature, he has spoken of the “dignity of Nature-” just observing and watching, in words sounding similar with that of Eckhart Tolle, the spiritual author, just a sense of presence or “beingness.” Tagore describes plants as “our friends who teach us how to greet the sky.” He also states, “their language is the primal language of life, and their movements point to the first springs of Being. The history of a thousand forgotten ages is stored up in their gestures.” And in the first poem of this volume he announces, Nature assumes the role of “ambassador of humanity” conveying a message of friendship in its realm.

### III

#### **Striking similarities between Vaishnava Soul Force and Tagore’s *Maanvika Bhuma* points out the philosophical significance in human-nature relationship.**

Tagore is affected by the idea of Radha as portrayed in Vaishnava writing. Radha is acknowledged as the *Alhadini Shakti* (intrinsic energy, soul force of eternal joy) of Krishna. The originator as well as the first poet, who introduced the idea of Radha for the first time in *Vaishnava padavali*, Jayadeva in his *Gitgovindam* has attempted to demonstrate that Krishna is simply the Supreme Being and Radha is His *Alhadini Shakti* – soul force. In Tagore's philosophy we find the articulation of the idea of Bliss and happiness, which, in a way, are nothing but the resonance of the Vaishnava notion of the *Alhadini Shakti*. He, on the one hand, like his Vaishnava masters, believes that “Radha is God’s power, both are divine and the finite are one, only both have taken different forms” and on the other he, unlike them, is also of the opinion that “though the finite and Infinite are one, but the Infinite wants to preserve the human personality as human for the fulfilment of this love” -

I’ve fallen from my life, friend –  
my tears since birth have washed my charms away.  
But I’ve known pure love.  
If I glimpse for an instant  
My own Dark Lord on the forest path,  
I kiss the dust at his feet a hundred times,  
as if each grain were a jewel.  
Unlucky star-crossed birth,  
I long only to stay within the shadow  
Of his flute and taste from afar his dark smile.  
Radha is the Dark Lord’s Mistress!  
May her pleasure be endless!  
But it’s grief that’s endless,  
a river of unseen tears.  
Is your indifference endless also, Black One?  
Its half-bloomed flowers fall unseen  
Into the river of human tears. (translations by Chase Twichell)

Tagore’s comprehensive outlook regarding the environment referred to as ‘the atmosphere around the earth’ helps him realize in him the unity of Universal Man. This unity is the final realizable objective for humans. This universal human existence or *Manavika Bhuma* gives a complete sense of harmony & compassion, deep rootedness, self-worth and complete understanding of Reality. The Reality out there

in nature or in the environment, is within human too. So, both nature and human are an inseparable part of this Reality.

For Tagore, an awareness of perfection is the essential part of human nature. Towards the end of his lecture on *Man* he writes, “The expression of life is internal; the whole of it is pure movement. Therefore, the language of movement is immediately real to us, it is the language of our life. The reality of this endless movement we have known as truth in relation to our own inner self.”

Tagore comprehended the power of **surplus in human life, recognizes the perfection and potential in human nature.**

In *Probhat Utsav* (Festival of the Dawn), Tagore projects his cosmic awareness.

Who knows how my soul has opened up today,  
all the universe is gathered in the self.  
All under the sun have found their place over there,  
they laugh in intimate embrace. (Rabindra-Rachanabali p.55)

In Tagore’s lyric poetry and songs, one encounters with the use of “unisex” third person pronoun in a deliberate manner to create an atmosphere of refined poetic ambiguity. It is as if he is asking us to forget the he and she and to concentrate on the essence of the human situation. Through his refined poetic ambiguity Tagore reminds, possibilities of overcoming unequal discrimination not only between gender but also those discriminations that have divided within cultures, in societies, between nations and so on. So, one can look up to his skilful poetic exuberance with a socio-cultural-political-ecological essence.

Tagore explains the unity of Spirit and Nature in terms of an intensely real force or energy. It is an energy that we encounter at every step in our experience. To this energy the poet gives different names, such as the force of life (*Jivani-shakti*), the stream of life (*Jivana-pravaha*), the flow of life (*Pranadhara*). In short it is the Identity-in-difference that Tagore infers with creative, dynamic spirit of life and the animating power.

Tagore takes immense pleasure in describing this idea of life-force. He toys around with it and observes from every possible dimension. “There is a stream of life within me. I experience it, and through it I also experience my oneness with the world around me.” At times, he describes it as a “stream of consciousness” (*Chetana-pravaha*). In a letter Tagore quotes on *Amar Dharma*, “It flows through every blade of grass, every branch of every tree. It thrills the green fields around me. I see every fibre of palm sapling quivering with consciousness.”

### **Conclusion**

In *Ananta Jibon* (Infinite Life), poet expresses his awareness of the Divine.

At the centre of this Universe  
there is an ocean,  
its water is silent.  
From all its sides  
streams come incessantly to merge in it. (*Rabindra-Rachanabali* p.57)

Tagore’s philosophy of eco-poetry is scattered in his literature. So, one has to derive, systematize and associate the different thoughts and develop a conceptual framework from them. Tagore upheld an activist ethics. According to him we should not run away from the ecological agonies of the ages. Further he states, ‘harmony is the essence of human personality.’ He stood for harmony to be attained between nature and humans, as he believed that the immanence of ultimate reality has to be realized in external nature and in inner human recesses.

His affection towards plants and animals was remarkably brought out with poetic expressions. Tagore was passionately attached to nature throughout his life. He wished to be part of every aspect of it, excitedly, as if this life was given to him to discover all the forms of Nature. Tagore expresses his awareness about the mystery behind every object of Nature in the life-sense, in *Sonar Tari* (from one of the collection of poems), he acclaims Earth as an all-encompassing whole of which human beings as part along with the other species. He affirms that the human species must live in harmony with its natural environment:

...Mother made of earth, may I live diffused in your soil; spread myself in every direction like spring's joy; burst this breast-cage, shatter this stone-closed narrow wall, this blind dismay jail of self; swing, hum, shake, flop, radiate, disperse, shudder, be startled by sudden lights and thrills, flow through the whole globe – edge to edge, north to south, east to west; burgeon with secret sap in moss, lichen, grass, branch, bark, leaf; touch with rippling fingers cornfields bent with the weight of golden ears; prevail fill new blossoms with colour, aroma, nectar; fill too, with blue, waters of vast seas, and dance to ceaseless waves on quiet beaches; hurrah language from wave to wave everywhere; lay myself like a white scarf on mountain-tops, in lofty regions of solitude, lands of hushed unsullied snow.

Lastly, the word *kavi* (poet) as found in the Vedas means the person who merely saw the inspired word and sang. As Sri Aurobindo states, ‘a poet is neither a logical analyser nor scientific reckoner. One is simply a seer and a visionary. And the rhythm or music emerging out of the inner sense of the poet or from the higher sources of inspiration leads one to the understanding of the Truth.’ Inspired poets like Tagore deliberately kept away from excessive use of intellect, as it could alter the embodied vision of the absolute. Instead, he indulged in the free play of the intuitive reason, finer passions, fancy dream, delight and creative imagination to invoke the true essence. Tagore was one such unique poet who revived the true spirit of poetry through the Vaishnava teachings in Bengal. Sri Aurobindo's words shed illuminating light on Tagore's poetic achievement, “a balanced harmony maintained by a system of subtle recurrences is the foundation of immortality in created things....”

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