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## Folk-consciousness in Tagore's *Gora*: A Reading

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### **Abstract:**

Contrary to the popular estimation, it can fairly be asserted that Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) literary works bear numerous evidences of his serious engagement with the marginalised sections of the society. His *magnum opus*, *Gora*, published in 1910, exemplifies his engagement with the idea of secular love celebrated by the wandering village singers of Bengal, called Bauls. The Bauls, as Tagore writes in his *The Religion of Man*, were the illiterate people, who "declare in their songs the divinity of Man, and express for him an intense feeling of love" and suggest that "the religions are never about a God of cosmic force, but rather about the God of human personality". The narrative of *Gora* shows the victory of secular love and humanism over the caste, race and narrow forms of human identities. What is finally established is the fundamental divinity of man that happens to be also the primal message of the songs of the Bauls. The novel proves that Tagore, though belonged to the upper class section of the Bengali society for being a *zamindar*, could not remain indifferent to the humanistic and secular ideals enshrined in the songs of the Baul sect, which belonged to the so-called peripheral sections of the society.

**Keywords:** Tagore, *Gora*, the Bauls, humanism, universal love.

The word 'Baul' probably comes from the Sanskrit words "Vatula" (madcap), or "Vyakula" (restless) and used for someone who is "possessed" or "crazy". The Bauls, chiefly residing in West Bengal and Bangladesh, are the wandering minstrels who sing the glory of the universal love, eternal peace and spiritual bliss through their simple songs. Belonging to the peripheral sections of the society, the Bauls express their natural aversion for the images, temples, scriptures, symbols, or ceremonials. They are the nonconformists with the mainstream religious practices of the Hindus. Their simple and mellifluous songs express an intense yearning of the heart for the divinity which is in Man. Rabindranath Tagore detects in their songs the essence of all religions. In an essay entitled "Man's Universe", included in *The Religion of Man* Tagore writes: "Coming from men who are unsophisticated, living in a simple life in obscurity, it gives us a clue to the inner meaning of all religions. For it suggests that these religions are never about a God of cosmic force, but rather about the God of human personality" (16). What impressed Tagore most in the songs of the Bauls was the "religious expression that was neither grossly concrete, full of crude details, nor metaphysical in its rarefied transcendentalism. At the same time it was alive with an emotional sincerity" ("The Man of my Heart" 63). Song is the only vehicle of the Bauls to communicate the message of

universal love to the people belonging to all sects. The following verse by Narahari describes the main tenets of the Baul sect:

That is why, brother, I became a madcap Baul.

No master I obey, nor injunctions, canons or custom.

Now no men-made distinctions have any hold on me,

And I revel only in the gladness of my own welling love.

In love there's no separation, but comingling always.

So I rejoice in song and dance with each and all. (Cited in "The Baul Singers of Bengal 117)

The Bauls believe in the spiritual unity of all human beings. Since all the distinctions of society, class, caste, religion and culture are made by man, they move towards the discovery of the essential divinity of man. Human beings are supposed to be the living temples of God, "the microcosm in which the cosmic abode of the all-pervading Supreme Being is represented" (118); and the songs of the Bauls address that God in Man. Thus, what the Bauls celebrate is the concept of universal love; love that makes no discriminations on the basis of religion, creed or nationality. They believe that man is essentially made in the image of God, and to glorify the divinity in man is their highest objective. However, there was a galaxy of ancient Indian saints and mystic thinkers like Kabir, Nanak, Ravidas, Dadu who, like the Bauls, held that the human body is the living abode of the God.

Tagore, who is often criticised for representing the aristocratic people and their feelings in his writings, was hugely impressed and inspired by the concept of universal love celebrated in the simple and unadorned songs of the Bauls. His numerous songs and essays bear the evidence of his love for the Bauls. But nowhere is this love for the Bauls manifested more eloquently than in his masterpiece *Gora* (1910). The narrative of the novel shows how Gora, initially an orthodox Hindu nationalist and a man with caste prejudices, gradually overcomes his limitations to finally actualise the sublime ideal of universal love which happens to be the primal ideal of the Indian history and culture. The plot of the novel traces the journey of the protagonist from innocence to experience. When the action of the novel opens, Gora projects himself as an orthodox and aggressive Hindu nationalist with his unflinching faith in the Hindu scriptures. He asserts that "Scriptural rules must be accepted as final" (*Gora* 30). A Hindu bigot, Gora is prone "to prove the blameless excellence of Hindu religion and society" (*Gora* 53-54). He even "began religiously to bathe in the Ganges, regularly to perform ceremonial worship morning and evening, to take particular care of what he touched and what he ate, and even to grow a *tiki*" (*Gora* 54). So, in this phase of his life Hinduism, for Gora, was more a matter of rituals and formalities than a matter of religion. Even his insistence on taking his bath in the Ganges of Tribeni during the eclipse of the sun bespeaks his concerns with ritualistic religion and orthodoxy. He is yet to learn the quintessence of true religion; he is yet ready to go beyond the formalities of religion to realize the real truth of all religions.

For Tagore, the concept of universal love as an ideal is superior to the narrow form of love shown to one's own religions or class. Gora's obsession with Hindu customs proves therefore ironical at the final moment of discovery of his true identity. It is revealed that Gora is not a Hindu at all; he is the orphaned child of an Irishman who died during the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857. This dramatic revelation of Gora's true identity is epiphanic in the sense that it demystifies Gora's usual understanding of human relationships and worldviews. At the crucial moment of discovery of his true identity, Gora comes to acknowledge the nature of universal love that India so stoutly cultivate: "To-day I am really an Indian! In me there is no longer any opposition between Hindu, Mussulman, and Christian. To-day every caste in India is my caste, the food of all is my food!" (*Gora* 863). Thus, what is accepted as final in the novel is the basic human identity sans traditional marks of social discrimination. As the Bauls do not attach importance to the markers of discrimination so Gora, in the moment of utter astonishment, realizes the meaninglessness of the man-made customs. Gora's "cry of pain upon learning the secret of his past becomes, paradoxically, a cry of liberation as well" (Chakravarty 69). Gora's joy of liberation is spiritual as it proceeds from his realization of freedom from the deadening social conventions. His 'education' comes in the form of his knowledge of the larger implication of truth, humanity and religion. He elevates to the height of the Bauls in his recognition of unity of all human beings in their multiple manifestations. The novel thus shows the journey of Gora from a Hindu nationalist and fanatic to a man enriched with spiritual and universal love.

The Lolita-Binoy marriage, the most controversial episode narrated in the novel, is finally solemnised by the liberal-humanist and unprejudiced Paresh Babu. Even Gora does not approve of the marriage. But Paresh Babu comes forward to save the freedom of the individual against the dictates of the society. Paresh Babu's letter removes all the obstacles from the way of their marriage:

...if you want to transcend the limitations of your societies then you must make yourselves greater than any society. Your love and your united lives must not only denote the beginning of some power of dissolution, but must show also a principle of creation and stability....Those who merely live according to rule do not advance society, they only carry it along....God never under any conditions binds his creations with fetters; He awakens it through constant changes to ever new life. (*Gora* 684-5)

Thus what is finally established through this marriage is the affirmation of the truth of individual freedom and love. It is for this very reason that Gora goes to Paresh Babu to learn the 'mantra' at the end of the novel: "To-day give me the 'mantram' of that Deity who belongs to all, Hindu, Mussulman, Christian, and Brahmo alike—the doors of whose temple are never closed to any person of any caste whatever—He who is the God of India herself!" (*Gora* 865). He is elevated to universal humanism only after acknowledging Anandamoyi as the very incarnation of love, compassion, welfare and noble humanity: "Mother, you are my mother!...You have no caste, you make no distinctions, and have no hatred—you are only the image of our welfare! It is you who are India!" (*Gora* 867). Thus it is love in the sense of the

Bauls that removes all the barriers from the way of unification of Gora with the people around him.

A humanist, Tagore believed that anything that obstacles the growth of human amity and leads human beings astray from the path of charity and harmony must be immoral. The history of human civilization is the history of the growth of humanistic ideals of love, acceptance, tolerance, cooperation and spiritual harmony. His is the gospel of love for humanity. Tagore's denunciation of communalism and sectarianism develops from his conceptualisation of the fundamental unity of all human beings, and the novel, like many other significant literary works of Tagore, registers his ultimate affinity with non-sectarian humanist position. The novel asserts the need to conceptualise the nation on the fundamental humanistic and secular ideals of love, faith and mutual amity, and thus denouncing the practice of exclusion and marginalisation.

One of the principal features of Tagore's literary ventures, as Santosh Chakrabarti argues in his *Studies in Tagore: Critical Essays*, had been to preach the gospel of harmony—between man and man, community and community, country and country and finally, the finite and the infinite (41). Tagore had been an inveterate traveller. His travels abroad and within India, sometimes as a cultural ambassador and sometimes to raise funds for his dream-project at Santiniketan, had always been motivated by an unmistakable zest for striking a synthesis of the East and the West and to disseminate the message of love and harmony. His socio-metaphysical philosophy of love and harmony stems from his understanding of the vast physical universe in scientific terms. While explaining the history of evolution of life from the inert cells, Tagore observes in the essay "Man's Universe":

A multitude of cells were bound together into a larger unit, not through aggregation, but through a marvellous quality of complex inter-relationship maintaining a perfect co-ordination of functions. This is the creative principle of unity, the divine mystery of existence, that baffles all analysis. The larger co-operative units could adequately pay for a greater freedom of self-expression, and they began to form and develop in their bodies new organs of power, new instruments of efficiency. This was the march of evolution ever unfolding the potentialities of life. (13)

The "divine principle of unity" out of which had evolved the life is the predominant motive force of the universe. And man is the most perfect and complex product of evolution. So "The most perfect inward expression has been attained by man in his own body. But what is most important of all is the fact that man has also attained its realization in a more subtle body outside his physical system" (14). The greatest law of the urge for unity among the diverse objects that reigns supreme in the whole universe also permeates the mind of man. This is because man is the microcosmic unit of the macrocosmic universe. This is where the ideal of the Bauls merges with the philosophy of Tagore.

Tagore's *Gora* thus links the marginal heritage of the Baul sects with the mainstream tradition of the Hindu religion. This only fortify the notion that there is no essential

dichotomy between the marginal and the central, higher and lower; rather they jointly form one composite religious and cultural tradition, the great Indian tradition. The manifestations may be different, but they are united by their essential unity in the celebration of love and spiritual amity while disregarding the so-called markers of discrimination.

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