

Rabindranath Tagore and his Songs

Rabindranath Tagore, an intellectual giant, made miracles with the touch stone of his towering talent and in this sense it would not be an exaggeration to call him a "wizard of words". Tagore's unsurpassed poetic genius charmed the West and brought him the Nobel prize in his favor. But his musical talent is almost unknown to the West. As Philippe Stern in the introduction of *CHANSONS DE RABINDRANATH TAGORE*, observes, "It is not always known in the West that Tagore is not only a poet, but a musician as well. In his work, indeed, poetry and music cannot be separated. Songs form an important part of his creative work and in these, words and melody complete each other." Mr. Fox Strangways, a renowned scholar of Indian Music, describes Tagore's songs as, "The notes of song are no longer their mere selves, but the vehicle of a personality, and as such they go behind this or that system of music to that beauty of sound which all systems put out their hands to seize. These melodies are such as would have satisfied Plato." [The *MUSIC OF HINDOSTAN*, The India Society, London.] The English poet, W. B. Yeats also remarks about his songs, "Rabindranath Tagore writes music for his words, and one understands that he is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which never seems strange, unnatural, or in need of defense."

For this reason, his songs are more appealing and enjoyable when those are presented in original Bengali which is not very much different from Sanskrit, - as according to Rev. C. F. Andrews, a life-long friend of Tagore, - "80 percent of Bengali words are of Sanskrit origin." In addition to this if the original tune is added to it, one can taste the supreme quality of the creation of this great poet. Tagore himself, in his *REMINISCENCES* [page 208], writes: "I am always reluctant to publish books of the words of my songs, for therein the soul must needs be lacking. ... Besides, the best part of a song is missing when the tune is absent, for thereby its movement and its colour are lost and it becomes like a butterfly whose wings have been plucked." [An Indian Folk Religion, Creative Unity, page 78] The poet himself was also aware of this fact and as Arnold A. Bake who spent a long time in Tagore's international university of *Vishwa-Bharati* at *Shanti-Niketan*, points out in his book "*CHANSONS DE RABINDRANATH TAGORE*", "Tagore is quite conscious of values of his own musical compositions. 'I have introduced', he said once to Mr. Thompson, 'some new elements in our music.'... 'This is a parallel growth to my poetry. Anyhow, I love this aspect of my activity. I get lost in my songs and then I think that those are my best work; I get quite intoxicated. I often think that, if all my poetry is forgotten, my songs will live with my countrymen and have a permanent place ... All the same, I know the artistic value of my songs. They have a great beauty'."

Apart from this, Tagore's creations have a universal appeal which cannot be confined in one particular state or province or even in a specific country. As W. B. Yeats remarks, "-- while Mr. Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity." Because of this, he is correctly titled as the *Vishwa-Kavi* or the poet of the universal understanding. Again to quote Arnold A. Bake, "His works show the great mystical value he attributes to music in common with Bengali tradition. The Divine Presence is the tune of the mystic flute or of the vibrating strings of the Vina, the finest of all Indian musical instruments. The Universe is the song of the Creator, and its music is the heart-beat of the world, which makes us aware of the great communication of love and makes us yearn to melt in Him."

It is absolutely important to be aware of a few facts about *Rabindra-Sangeet* [songs of Rabindranath Tagore]. Tagore's music is not separated from Indian classical music and at the same time it is not a mere part of it. It is based on Indian classical music; still it has a completely different style. Arnold A. Bake remarks, "Tagore's achievement as regards the classical music has been as with everything else, that of breaking fetters. His whole life-work is imbued with that appeal to freedom and simplicity, to the spontaneous and youthful élan which no conventions can bind." In Tagore's songs poetry and melody have been blended and are complemented with each other whereas in Indian classical music *Raags* or tune have a more prominent role. The basic difference between traditional Indian classical music and Tagore's one is as Ernest Rhys points out, "In Hindustani music the words are usually insignificant, but in Bengal the influence of words has been too strong for the independence of pure music." For the sake of beauty, Tagore has freely and frequently blended different *Raags* which is rare in Indian classical music and he has created a good number of new *Thaals* which are not found in Indian classical music. To conclude with Philippe Stern, "From the musical point of view, Tagore stands at the meeting-place of three different influences: that of European music, that of classical Hindu music (an extremely sophisticated one, bound by strict rules) and thirdly that of the popular religious music of Bengal. ...Later, however, Tagore's powerful personality asserted itself, and he threw off both the Western influences of his childhood and youth and that of Indian classical music. Western influences does still appear fleetingly in his songs, but so intimately blended with Indian melodic phrases that their tonality is not altered, only enriched with a novel hue. His style is a simple one, and yet the melodic contour is not harsh. It is softened by numerous ornamentations: guttural sounds, light, barely suggested appoggiatura and discreet portandos. These never obscure or clog up the musical phrase, but rather emphasize it by rendering it softer and more pliable... Equally simple are his rhythms, especially as compared with those of classical Indian music or *Kirtan*."

PART TWO

The Main Text