

The Religion of the Forest by Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)- The Bard of Bengal

- ✚ Born in Calcutta
- ✚ Famous as a multifaceted genius- writer, educator, philosopher, social reformer
- ✚ Gave great contributions to Indian Literature
- ✚ Reshaped Bengali Literature
- ✚ First non-European to win Nobel for literature (1913- for *Gitanjali*)
- ✚ Exponent of Bengali renaissance
- ✚ Hailed as a mystic poet
- ✚ Exhibit great love of nature and it occupies a central position in his writings.
- ✚ Nature symbolises freedom for Tagore

The Religion of Forest

- ✚ Essay emphasis the significance of forest in Indian life and culture
- ✚ Ancient Indians venerated forest as a place of perfection.
- ✚ For Indians forest is a source of life and unity.
- ✚ In the essay Tagore represents forest as a teacher to humanity from whom man must learn the lessons of “Ekatha”(unity), “anada”(happiness) and “anukampa”(compassion).

The Religion of the Forest

Tagore begins the essay by referring to the essential truth of life. He observes that the truth of our life depends upon our attitude of mind towards life and this attitude is shaped by our nature of dealing with life, our circumstances and our temperament or character. This attitude decides our relationship with the universe and that relationship can either be one based on conquest or one based on union. If it is a relationship of conquest it is through the cultivation power. On the other hand if it is based on union it happens through the cultivation of sympathy. Thus Tagore says, when we attempt to realize the truth of existence we tend to give emphasis either on the concept of dualism or on the concept of unity.

According to *Upanishads* emancipation (liberation) of human soul depends upon the realization of the ultimate truth of unity; that is everything emanates from the ultimate creator (“Ishavasyam idam sarvam”). Renunciation, not possession, can grant one enjoyment.

➤ **The ideal of perfection taught by forest dwellers:**

It is central to our classical literature

The teachings of the forest dwellers get expressed through our ancient epic clusters and narratives. In North India men never differentiates between their lives and “the grant life”. Forest is not a distant presence for them. Rather they love to establish a close relationship with it as it enters into their work and leisure. It is involved in their daily requirements as well as contemplations or thoughts. Thus their view of the truth/life is a view based on the manifestation of the unity of all things and not of difference.

➤ **The concept of “ Sacchidananda”**

This Compound word in Sanskrit sums up the world view proposed by India.

“Sacchidananda” – ‘Sat’ + ‘chit’ + ‘ananda’

“Sacchidanda” means that reality is essentially one and has got three phases.

‘sat’ means being/ existence

- The simple fact that things are
- It is the relationship of common existence that keeps us connected with everything else around

‘Chit’ means –knowledge/ self -awareness/comprehension

- It is the fact that we know.
- It helps us maintain a connection with all that we know.
- It is a relationship of knowledge.

‘Ananda’ means delight/ bliss

- It is the fact that we enjoy.
- It unites us with all other things through a relationship of love.

True Indian view holds the idea that our consciousness of the world is imperfect if we conceive it in a materialistic manner, that is merely as a sum total of the things that exist and as ruled by laws. It can become perfect only if our consciousness strikes the realisation that “all things are spiritually one with it”. This realisation alone can grant us “ananda” (joy or happiness). The most important or highest purpose of our life in this world is to realise our own self in the world by expanding sympathy rather than to live, to know or to make use of it. We should not alienate or distance ourselves from the world. Neither should we

try to dominate it. But rather try to understand it and unite it with our own selves in perfect union.

➤ **Kalidasa and the portrayal of nature**

Kalidasa was the poet of the court of the Great King Vikramaditya. His age was one of prosperity and development and people from various cultures lived at Ujjain, his kingdom capital. But even in that age of luxury and prosperity Kalidasa in his poems expressed a love and respect about the forest hermitage. According to Tagore this is an instance of the dominant ideal that occupies the mind of India- a respect for nature.

***Shakuntala*- representation of nature**

It is a drama by Kalidasa in which the hermitage is the dominant background which even overshadows the luxurious palace of the King who is also the hero of the play. According to Tagore this recognises the idea of human kinship with both the conscious and unconscious creations in the world. Not just in *Shakuntalam*, but in all our ancient literature the hermitage shines out and is represented as a place where the gap between man and other creations in the world is filled or bridged.

Rithusamhara is considered as less matured a work of art in comparison to Kalidasa's other love poems like *Shakuntalam* or *Kumara- Sambhava*. Still the text too is great in its representation of nature and seasons which sings about the "varied harmony of nature's symphony". Representation of various seasons like summer, rain, and spring in the poem through beautiful images shows the poet's great reverence and understanding towards nature.

Contrast between King's court and forest in *Shakuntala*

Most of Kalidasa's works represent a contrast between the uncontrolled impulsive kingly splendour and the calm serene strength of controlled desires. In *Shakuntala* this contrast is represented through the pompous heartlessness of the King's court on the one side and the natural purity of the forest hermitage on the other side. The opening scene of the play itself symbolises this contrast. The drama begins with the king mercilessly chasing a poor frightened Penelope in hunting. It is a haunting scene that represents the clash between the spirit of the king's life and the spirit of the forest. The king's spirit stands for power and oppression while the spirit of the forest acts like "sharanyam sarva-bhuthanam" (protector of all creatures- a spirit of love). Thus we hear the forest dwellers plead with the king to spare the beautiful deer which is actually the essence of the play. ("Never oh never is the arrow meant to pierce the tender body of a deer, even as the fire is not for the burning of flowers").

➤ Representation of forest in *Ramayana*

Rama, along with Lakshmana and Sita were sent to the forest in their banishment. Despite that they lived in leaf thatched huts and slept on the bare ground their heart felt a deep kinship with the exuberance of nature. They were never in exile as they had company of the woodlands and the streams. Though poets of a different temperament might represent their life at forest as a period of hardship (to stress it as an act of martyrdom) *Ramayana* represented it in an entirely different colour. *Ramayana* made us realise the greatness of Rama not by depicting his fierce struggle with nature but by depicting his sympathy with nature. Sita too had shown her love and excitement in being one with nature. Though she was the daughter in law of a great kingdom, she enjoyed her life in the forest, asking about the flowers, trees and shrubs which she saw for the first time in her life. She was delighted to the core at the sight of the flowers and trees and rivers.

After taking abode at the Chitrakuda peak surrounded by the Mayavati River Rama forgot the pain of leaving his kingdom. The loss of his kingdom and the separation from his friends no longer troubled him. Rama and Sita bore immense love for one another. They also maintained an intense love for the nature or 'Prakriti' also which is the universe of life itself. That is why itself when Sita was abducted the loss was so great to the forest.

In India places of nature's splendour are holy and sacred. It is not based on the place's fitness to do cultivation or make settlements or as a source of supply of man's basic needs. Rather man held a free approach to nature as a place to realise his soul and grow beyond his own self. Thus the Himalayas, the Vindhya Hills, the Ganges and the Jamuna are all sacred, worshipped and being respected. Our next generation is surrounded by the holy presence of nature whose majestic mystery brings in the light of awakening to the soul of man. India wins the world by its ideal of worship and spiritual communion. Also according to Tagore the concept of freedom held supreme by India is one based on the realization of spiritual unity.

➤ Vashishta and Vishvamitra

Then Tagore proceeds to analyse the representation of two great sages from mythology- Vashishta and Vishvamitra. Though both of them are equally great they represent two different and mutually conflicting types of wisdom. Vishvamithra sought power and was proud of the power achieved. Vashishta though lightly attracted to power never allowed it to overpower his soul. His pain and loss could never affect his soul that is illuminated with a greater wisdom. That is why itself he got the capacity to rise over power, pain and a sense of loss and finally forgive. Tagore beautifully analyses how these two sages influenced the epic hero of *Ramayana*, Ramachandra in two different ways. While Rama's initiation to spiritual life which was one of peace and perfection was from Vashishta his initiation to war was from Vishvamithra. It was Vishvamithra who called Rama's assistance to kill demons and gave him weapons to fight.

According to Tagore these two sages represent “two guiding spirits of civilization” that is power (Vishvamithra) and harmony (Vashishta). Creation is reconciliation of these two contrary forces, that is the force of attraction and the force of repulsion. When they reconcile there will not be any fire or fight but only smile and happiness. But if any one of these two forces overpowers the other there will be death, and rigid coldness.

Throughout ages humanity is busy with the one great creation of human life. All teachings, wisdom acquired by him, discipline and all such qualities are directed towards an achievement of power. It is the harmony of contrary forces that provide balance to all living creations. But man failed to understand this and thus remained baffled at the very creative capacity within him. Tagore concludes the essay by reminding that it is the presence of endless love that empowers us to accomplish the miracle of creation. It is love that brings these conflicting forces into harmony.

➤ **Key concepts**

1. Eco criticism

It is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature and environment. It focuses on how literature treats environment, nature and issues related to it through various literary texts. Tagore’s essay is an example.

2. Ecosystem

It is a community or group of living organisms that live and interact as a system. In it the living organisms interact with the non- living factors of their environment. That is it is a combination of both the biotic and the abiotic factors.

- a) **Biotic factors:** all living organism in an ecosystem. E.g. – plants, animals, decomposers etc.
- b) **Abiotic factors:** non -living components of an ecosystem. E.g. Water, light, radiation, temperature, soil etc.