SOME FREEDOM WITHIN A SMALL RANGE: TAGORE ON MORAL STANDARD

The drama of existence is not absolutely predestined in character. Duality is there in the depths of existence. The contradiction of free impulse and directive will work upon life and evolves an orderly scheme of things. But, all the orders are temporary, tentative, flexible, elastic, dynamic and after all, transitory, and different from place to place and from time to time.

Our individual impulses, passions and desires are unruly and rebellious. But our character subdues these elements into a harmonious whole. That is why despite occasional violence or turbulence the drama of existence is not altogether hopelessly desultory. Despite the possibility of eruption of unruliness, there is also a constant harmony of chance and determination which has been making our dynamic existence eternally new and living.

There is in human affairs an element of elasticity – “some freedom within a small range”,¹ which is for the experience and expression of our personality, never rigidly fixed. Even within the superstructure of arrangement, i.e., law and prescribed regulations, one can give spontaneous expression of one’s moulded and refined variations of passion in the forms of newer and newer creations between apparent reality and idealistic, artistic and creative illusions. If we do not cut ourselves adrift from the central law of existence, we can have enjoyable freedom for almost full self-expression within the limits of social norms. Furthermore, if in our conduct we can follow the law of some sort of goodness, we can have real liberty of self-expression.

Some sort of uncertainty will always be there about everything fundamental in our experience. And yet there is also a constant process of reconciliation, “the individual taste conforming to the universal standard.”² However, is there any fixed universal standard? That is also tentative and just in vogue for the present.

When Dilipkumar Ray asks Rabindranath Tagore whether sexual enjoyment between a man and a woman is immoral, Tagore explains to him in a letter³ that the same is not itself immoral. Had it been so, then the sons and daughters would have been outcomes or issues of immoral acts, i.e., sin. But, Tagore asserts that sexual enjoyment must be limited

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to husband and wife only as long as the marriage system is in vogue in human society. In one of his congregational addresses, Tagore says that one-to-one, devoted, and, trusting relationships between a couple bring forth an ideal moral standard for strengthening the family as well as the entirety of society. On another occasion Tagore says –

The unified being of Shiva and Parvati is the perfect symbol of the eternal in the wedded love of man and woman.

Once again, while interpreting Kalidása’s Kumarasambhavam, Tagore says that sheer voluptuous outbreaks must be burnt away with the wrath of Shiva, i.e., the epitome of goodness. When coupled with Parvati or Sati, i.e., the epitome of femininity, the divine issue is Kumara, who defeats the evils. Ku means the evils, mar means to destroy. Mythological characters may or may not be historical ones. Yet, they are outcomes of our ancient cultures always concerned with our passions and desires, our love and affection, the problems of evil and powerful ways of solving them. Mythological characters are personifications of the moral and immoral traits of human psychology.

Tagore always says that our early life should be based on brahmacharya (i.e., practice of moral austerity) so as to enter into ideal conjugal love in youth. A vina should be perfectly tuned so that good music can be played on it. An untuned vina cannot emit music, similarly an unrestrained chaotic life cannot enjoy the bliss of ideal love. This saying is applicable to both men and women.

Apart from George Santayana, the author of The Sense of Beauty, many thinkers, poets and artists say that beauty springs from “the irrational part of our nature” Tagore’s creativity provides ample examples of this truth. Just for an example the song “He nirupama” may be cited. In this song, Tagore tells the unparalleled one to forgive him if his song emits an impatient tune, if his dealings become restless, if his glances surpass the limit of decorum, In his own words –

He nirupama,
Gane yadi lage bhiwala tan kariyo kshama.
* * *
Chapalata aji yadi ghate tabe kariyo kshama.
* * *
Ankhi yadi aj kare aparadh kariyo kshama; etc.