



Consonanze 11.2

ANANTARATNAPRABHAVA

STUDI IN ONORE DI GIULIANO BOCCALI

*a cura di Alice Crisanti, Cinzia Pieruccini,
Chiara Policardi, Paola M. Rossi*

II



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II

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Rabindranath Tagore. The Infinite in the Human Being

Fabio Scialpi

The Upaniṣads [...] played a critical role in the development of religious ideas in India [...]. Even though theoretically the whole of the vedic corpus is accepted as revealed truth, in reality it is the Upaniṣads that have continued to influence the life and thought of the various religious traditions that we have come to call Hindu.¹

Indeed, not only do the *Upaniṣads* represent a sort of great innovation compared to the previous Indian religious tradition, but they also constitute a characteristic manifestation of the Indian mind, which is peculiarly inclined to including, modifying, and reconciling diverse contributions of the human spirit into an original system of thought. Here various traditions can coexist, maintain their religious inspiration, and compromise to form a superior and richer body of shared sacred values. The outcome, from ancient times down to contemporaneous Masters, like Rabindranath Tagore, has been a large following of faithful, distinct as they were for their religious sensitivity, but united by a strong feeling of a common heritage – a marvellous example of adaptation as well as one of the most precious suggestions that India has provided to the religious ideas and beliefs of mankind.

This is the reason why we have chosen this subject as a tribute of homage, however modest it may be, to a renowned student of Indian civilization.

As is well-known, the main teaching of these texts is centred on the Supreme Reality and its relationship with the phenomenal world and the human being, whose goal in life is the quest for, and wish to encounter this Supreme Reality. Two words, which gained great importance in the following history of Indian religious and philosophic thought, are used to hint at this mysterious Reality. *Ātman* refers to the individual microcosm and *Brahman* to the universal macrocosm – we therefore have two distinct words pointing to one and the same Reality ('The One'), an Absolute beyond any human rational and definite thought, which involves an insight of plenitude, greatness, and extension in time and space. But let us listen to what the texts themselves, in the form of a dialogue between the Master and his pupil, teach with regard to it.

1. Olivelle 2008, XXIII.

[...] “Sir, I do seek to perceive plenitude [the Infinite, *bhūman*]”. //

“Where a man sees, hears, or discerns no other thing – that is plenitude. Where one sees, hears, or discerns some other thing – that is scarcity. Now, plenitude is the immortal, while scarcity constitutes what is mortal”.

“Sir, on what is plenitude based?”.

“On one’s own greatness. Or, maybe, it is not based on greatness. ² Cattle and horses, elephants and gold, slaves and wives, farms and houses – these are what people here call greatness. But I don’t consider them that way; no, I don’t for they are all based on each other. //

“Plenitude [*sah* ‘he, that’], indeed, is below; plenitude is above; plenitude is in the west; plenitude is in the east; plenitude is in the south; and plenitude is in the north. Indeed, plenitude extends over this whole world.

“Now, the substitution of the word ‘I’ [*aham*] – ‘I am, indeed, is below; I am above; I am in the west; I am in east; I am in the south; and I am in the north. Indeed, I extend over this whole world’.

²“Next, the substitution of self [*ātman*] – ‘The self, indeed, is below; the self is above; the self is in the west; the self is in the east; the self is in the south; and the self is in the north. Indeed, the self extends over this whole world?’.

“A man who sees it this way, thinks about it this way, and perceives it this way; a man who finds pleasure in the self, who dallies with the self, who mates with the self, and who attains bliss in the self – he becomes completely his own master; he obtains complete freedom of movement in all the worlds. (*Chāndogya upaniṣad* 7. 23-25)³

In case we would like to acquire a more precise and physical representation of Ātman with relation to the human being, the same text provides a very poetical and powerful way to express the same concept in paradoxical terms.

²⁻³ “[...] This self (*ātman*) of mine that lies deep within my heart – it is smaller than a grain of rice or barley, smaller than a mustard seed, smaller even than a millet grain or a millet kernel; but it is larger than the earth, larger than the intermediate region, larger than the sky, larger even than all these worlds put together. /

⁴ “This self (*ātman*) of mine that lies deep within my heart – it contains all actions, all desires, all smells, and all tastes; it has captured this whole world; it neither speaks nor pays any heed. /

“It is *brahman*. On departing from here after death, I will become that”. (*Chāndogya upaniṣad* 3. 14. 2-4)³

2. *Ibid.*, 165-166, 353 n. 25.1, cf. Zaehner 2005, 150-151.

3. Olivelle 2008, 124.

And yet another text, amongst the great many we could quote, adds some other elements to our understanding, based, however, more on insight than a mere logical reasoning.

This person here is made of mind and consists of light. Lodged here deep within the heart, he is like a grain of rice or barley; he is the lord of all, the ruler of all! Over this whole world, over all there is, he rules. (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka upaniṣad* 5. 6)⁴

If we are to summarize this highly spiritual lesson coming from India, we could say that the *Upaniṣads* mainly reveal an essential truth – the Infinite (whatever it is called throughout these texts) is the inexhaustible source from which everything derives, and the plenitude of it spreads out in the cosmos. It dwells in the heart of human beings; and only he who knows (that is, encounters) it, «becomes completely his own master; he obtains complete freedom of movement in all the worlds». This Infinite, therefore, is the only Reality to be looked for in view of true freedom which is above and fulfils every other human desire.

But let us now come to one of the most celebrated personalities of modern India, Rabindranath Tagore, and see how he interpreted the truth alluded to in the Upaniṣadic texts. Born near Calcutta in 1861, he follows the pathway of great Bengali reformers and spiritual masters of the 19th century such as Ram Mohan Roy, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and his father Debendranath.

All of these as well as others in various areas of this huge country were well aware of the need for social and religious reforms in a society which, for many reasons, had maintained, especially in the Hindu community, customs and practices generally accepted as sacred rules. Such rules had been followed since time immemorial, but were no longer tenable in a modern society challenged by the Christian example in the matters of human rights.

Rabindranath was not truly a social reformer. From early childhood, he revealed a contemplative tendency to a mystical contact with Nature, where the balance and peace of spirit can be easily experienced, and were to prove essential in all the future convictions and activities of his private and public life. Let us examine a passage where he describes the awkward predicament of a young boy struggling over his lessons in a first primer, grappling with a dull spelling exercise.

Suddenly I came to a rhymed sentence of combined words, which may be translated thus – “It rains, the leaves tremble”. At once I came to a world wherein I recovered my full meaning. My mind touched the creative realm of expression [...]. The rhythmic picture of the tremulous leaves beaten by the rain opened before my mind

4. *Ibid.*, 74-75.

the world which does not merely carry information, but a harmony with my being. [...] my mind revelled in the unity of a vision. In a similar manner, on that morning in the village the facts of my life suddenly appeared to me in a luminous unity of truth. [...] I felt sure that some Being who comprehended me and my world was seeking his best expression in all my experiences, uniting them into an ever-widening individuality which is a spiritual work of art.⁵

Besides this natural feeling of union with Nature, Rabindranath – as Robert Charles Zaehner remarks – owed much to his father Debendranath, from whom he inherited a form of mysticism, which was a subtle combination of Advaita (non-dualism) and *bhakti* (devoutness to God/Goddess). This combination, according to Debendranath, «was most perfectly expressed in the *Īśā* Upanishad and which, though grounded in the infinite, embraced and sanctified all finite things».

All this, whatever moves on earth, is pervaded by the Lord. Renounce it first, and then enjoy. Covet not the goods of any man at all. [...] Into blind darkness enter they who reverence the non-compounded [or, ‘not coming to be’]; into a darkness greater yet enter they who rejoice in the compounded. (*Īśā upaniṣad* 1 and 12, cf. Zaehner 2005).⁶

«These two verses» – continues the same Author – «might serve as the text of which all the writings of Rabindranath Tagore are the commentary: they form the very stuff of his poetry».⁷

As a matter of fact, Tagore surpasses the tradition of the oldest *Upaniṣads*; taking his inspiration from the *Īśā*, the most theistic amongst them, he advances along a path which seems to be also influenced by the teaching of the *karma-yoga* imparted by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā*. His view is consistent with the tradition of the *Upaniṣads*, but is completed by a practical impact which combines self-forgetfulness with good works in a way which, to some extent, recalls *The Letter of James*.⁸ In fact, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka upaniṣad* professes a total oblivion both of oneself and the world to pursue the Absolute alone. Consider, for instance, this statement:

²¹ [...] “It is like this. As a man embraced by a woman he loves is oblivious to everything within or without, so this person embraced by the self (*ātman*) consist-

5. Zaehner 1966, 189.

6. *Ibid.*, 188; cf. Zaehner 2005, 165, strophe 9.

7. Zaehner 1966, 188.

8. «So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. / But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works”. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith» (2. 17-18).

ing of knowledge is oblivious to everything within or without [...]. /

²² “Here a father is not a father, a mother is not a mother, worlds are not worlds, gods are not gods, and Vedas are not Vedas. [...] Neither the good nor the bad follow him, for he has now passed beyond all sorrows of the heart. (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka upaniṣad* 4. 3. 21-22)”

However, in the words of Giuseppe Tucci, this is «an abyss of void. Annihilation of life. On the contrary, for Tagore, both man and the universe are the wonder of divine magic. [...] Nature is redeemed». ¹⁰ And Zaehner states:

For him [Tagore] immersion in the infinite never meant the exclusion of the finite: finite and infinite were not separate but indissolubly interconnected, there was no conflict between the state of “liberation” and the state of “bondage”, the “uncompounded” and the “compounded”, [...] for the golden thread that runs through both the infinite and the finite, God and the world, is love and joy; and there can be neither love nor joy unless there is duality and reciprocity.¹¹

Tagore’s vision is one by which Nature and human beings maintain a perfect harmony and carry the imprint of Truth and the Divine in themselves.¹² His is a religious way of life expressing itself in a few fundamental ideas regarding the situation of the human being in relation to the universe, which can be summarized in few points. The unity of mankind; the awareness of every individual that his/her very essence is shared with the Eternal Man, the Eternal Spirit of human unity living inside him/her; love considered in the most great extension and dimension; unselfish service to Truth and Beauty; commitment towards a gradual and whole accomplishment of these values. In such a way the finite human being manifests the Eternal in his/her own life and the Infinite in his/her love extended to every creature.¹³

Therefore, Tagore becomes a Master of Truth who reminds us of the sages of classical antiquity as well as the most celebrated among those of the *Upaniṣads*. However, compared with theirs, his lesson seems to be enriched by the creative participation in the feast of life which must express the Infinite residing in human

9. Olivelle 2008, 61.

10. Tucci 1962, 42.

11. Zaehner 1966, 188.

12. Giuseppe Tucci, who spent about a year in Śāntiniketan in 1925, participated intensively in the life of the *āśram* and met Tagore, recalls his encounter with him as follows: «the Poet, who was not only a creative genius in the field of art, but could give an impulse to that unbiased co-operation of all men who have not forgotten that hidden, divine light which lies in the depth of our soul» (Tucci 1961, 60).

13. Tagore 1961a, 9-18.

beings. In this feast, we manifest our richness and, through the artistic creation, carry our offerings to God as a tribute of joy.¹⁴

In this perspective, we understand not only Rabindranath's extraordinary artistic work,¹⁵ but also the multifaceted social and humane activities he carried out throughout his life. In the sphere of human rights, in favour of socially disadvantaged groups as well as against a jail system that he defined barbaric and dominated by fear. In the economic sector, by promoting small industrial and commercial initiatives to encourage local production exposed to heavy competition from foreign imported artefacts. In the ecological field, in his early support of the environment. Finally, in the political arena, in his opposition to nationalism and warning of the impending threats endangering the entire system of ethical values of his time.¹⁶ This was the menace he referred to in his last address, which was read out on the occasion of his eightieth birthday at Śāntiniketan on April 14th, 1941, and published as *Sabhyatar Sankat (Crisis in Civilization)*.¹⁷ He continued to work up to the end of his life, which happened in Calcutta on August 7th, 1941, at midday (when the sunlight is at its maximum intensity).¹⁸

I should like to conclude my brief notes with some verses from *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)*, which bear testimony to Rabindranath Tagore's Upaniṣadic inspiration in the awareness that the Infinite abides within oneself, joined with a feeling of confidence and devotion towards the Holy One:

When the heart is hard and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy.
 When grace is lost from life, come with a burst of song.
 When tumultuous work raises its din on all sides shutting me out from beyond,
 come to me, my lord of silence, with thy peace and rest.
 [...]
 When desire blinds the mind with delusion and dust, O thou holy one, thou wake-
 ful, come with thy light and thy thunder.¹⁹

14. Tagore 1962, 13.

15. See Yeats 2000, 7-10; Sen 2010, 38-45; Som 2009, 184 («Tagore's music was not merely another dimension of a multifaceted creative artist. It represented the very essence of his artistic being»); Mallik 2010, 26-37. An International Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Tagore from the Collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art (India) took place in Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, 29 March- 27 May, 2012 (Ministry of Culture, Government of India, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, *The Last Harvest, An International Exhibition of Paintings by Rabindranath Tagore*).

16. Banerjee 2010, 127-132.

17. Kripalani 1962, 393-394; Tagore 1961b, 262-263.

18. «It was an auspicious day in the Hindu calendar, the day of the full moon of *Sravana* (July-August), the month of the rainy season so well celebrated in his songs and poems» (Kripalani 1962, 397, footnote 8).

19. Tagore 1958, No. XXXIX, 18.

This seems to be the very essence of Hinduism, spanning its whole course from the *Upaniṣads* to Tagore, whether or not it is to be considered a religion in the proper (Western) sense as some scholars would question:

[...] to live out your *dharma* which is embedded in the conscience, to do what instinctively you know to be right, and thereby to live in harmony with the *dharma* of all things, so that in the end you may see all things in yourself and yourself in all things [...].²⁰

20. Zaehner 1966, 192.



Rabindranath Tagore, *Self-portrait*, «India Perspectives» 24, 2 (2010), 116.

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