

# The Great Unknown: Tagore's Vision of Life and Death

By Niranjana Bhagat

Today is the first death anniversary of Dhanpal Shah, our beloved Dhanpal. Today, we, the family and friends of Dhanpal have gathered here to remember him and to revere his memory. He had an infinite capacity for friendship. No man was a stranger to him. He had an inexhaustible energy for doing good. One who depended on him was never disappointed. He was always ready to help others but without making them feel that they were being helped. He had an inborn and an inherent quality of leadership, be it business or be it politics. He initiated and integrated many personal and public enterprises as a pioneer, which is a testimony to his own spirit of adventure. Having no family of his own, he shouldered and shared the responsibilities of many families. He was a renaissance man, a man of many parts, who cultivated a variety of interests and converged on life from many points. He was a perfectionist, a man of fastidious taste who loved good food and good clothes. Whatever he did, he did it with a style, a style which was his own, his inimitable style. He was a born vivante who was bursting and bubbling with *joie de vivre*, with joy that is in living. He loved life and all the good and beautiful things of this world. In his last days he lived in the shadow of death. He perhaps knew that he would die a sudden and untimely death. The last act of his life was typically an act of friendship. On the last day of his life he went out in the afternoon, purchased a few gifts for his friends, came back in the evening, placed the gifts on a chair and silently passed away. He was alone when he died. But he was not alone when he lived. He was always in the midst of men. Though he is no more, he is not alone. Now he lives and will always live in our memory. This lecture is delivered in his memory. It is our humble homage to one who was everybody's friend and nobody's foe, to one who lived in our midst then and lives in our memory now.

The subject of my lecture is 'The Great Unknown: Tagore's Vision of Life and Death'. I believe that it is a subject after Dhanpal's own heart, and I hope that he listens to this lecture from wherever he is. Let me begin with the song from which the title of this lecture 'The Great Unknown' is taken:

*Samukhe shantiparavar,  
Bhasao tarani he karnadhar.  
Tumi habe chir sathi.  
Lao lao he krod pati,  
Asimer pathe jvalibe  
Jyoti dhruvotarakar.*

*Muktidata, tomar kshama, tomar daya  
Habe chirpatheya chirjatrar.*

*Hay jena marter bandhan kshay,  
Virat vishv bahu meli lay,  
Pay antare nirbhay parichay  
Maha-ajanar.*

In front lies the ocean of peace  
Launch the boat, O Helmsman  
You will be the companion ever  
Take, O take him in your lap  
In the path of the Infinite  
Will shine the pole star  
Giver of freedom, your forgiveness, your compassion  
Will be wealth everlasting in the eternal journey  
May the mortal bonds perish  
May the vast universe take him in its arm

And may he know in his fearless heart

The Great Unknown.

Tagore had composed this song on 3 December 1939 when he was 78. Before he composed it, he had nearly died in 1937. He had suffered from a violent ear infection and had gone into coma for 60 hours on 10 September. But he had recovered from it. After he composed this song, he was to die within less than two years. He had composed it along with other 6 songs for a new production of his play 'Dak Ghar' which he had written in 1912. He wanted to sing it himself in the role of fakir after the death of his child hero, Amal. The production was called off because of his ill-health. He expressed a wish that the song was sung after his own death. Tagore died on 7 August 1941 at the age of 80. This song was sung for the first time at Shantiniketan on 17 August 1941 at the Shraddha ceremony on the tenth day after Tagore's death. It is now sung every year on 7 August at Tagore's death anniversary and that of others as well, like we did here to-day.

This song is Tagore's requiem. It is quintessential Tagore. This song is the ultimate in Tagore's vision of life and death. It is the climax, the culmination and the consummation of his life on this earth and his life after death. 'Dak Ghar', the play for which he composed it, is the exquisite embodiment, the expression par excellence of his vision of life and death. I shall return to this song and this play later in this lecture and refer the song to its proper content in the play.

The fountainhead of Tagore's inspiration both for his life and his work was in his own being, in his own personality. His own being was identified with the Eternal Being and his own personality was integrated with the Infinite Personality. The secret of this identity and integrity was in his spiritual freedom and the secret of his spiritual freedom was in his loneliness, rather in his aloneness.

Tagore was born in a family which was at the center of renaissance in Bengal. The advent of the British in India was, as it seems by hindsight, ordained by destiny. It was a prerequisite for

the confluence of the East and the west, the ancient and the modern, the old and the new and as a consequence of this confluence, a prelude to the birth of new India, the modern India. Raja Rammohan Roy was the father of this modern India. He had found a faithful friend in Prince Dwarkanath, Tagore's grandfather and a spiritual son in Maharshi Devendranath, Tagore's father. All the three elders were crusaders and champions of many momentous causes - social, religious and cultural. Their unconventional actions and unorthodox thoughts had antagonized the society and the society in turn had alienated them. Consequently, they enjoyed freedom - the freedom to choose their own way of life. The family had bequeathed the legacy of this freedom to all its children. Even so it was not ample and adequate to create the Tagore that was to be, the Tagore that we know. Tagore enjoyed within this freedom a greater freedom, a spiritual freedom. He was a lonely child in a lonely place.

Tagore family is known not only for its stature but also for its size - including that of the house at Jorasanko, in which the family lived. As a child Tagore hardly knew his father, since he was frequently away from home, mostly in the Himalayas and when at home he always lived aloof from the family. Tagore's mother Sarada Devi had born her husband 15 children. Tagore was the 14<sup>th</sup> child. She was initially weak and by the time Tagore was born she had already looked after 13 sons and daughters as well as daughters-in-law, sons-in-law and grandchildren[. Hence,] she was too weak to look after the 14th child. Tagore's elder brothers and sisters as well as sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law and nephews were in every way at a great distance from him - even were beyond his reach. Hence, as a child, he was left to the mercy of servants and their tyranny, their 'servocracy' - in a room in the servant's quarters in the north-east corner of the outer apartments. Not only was he forbidden to leave the house, but he was forbidden to enter many of the other rooms in the house. At times, Shyam, one of the servants, to spare himself the trouble of looking after him on his sprees would, as an easy strategy, place him in a selected spot in the room, trace a chalk circle around

him and warn him with the perils of transgressing the magic circle, which would remind him of the fate of Sita in Ramayana. So, he would stay in the spot and dare not step out even though the servant would have disappeared. Luckily for him there was a window near the spot. He would sit, like his Amal, near the window the whole day and peering through the barriers of bars and shutters, gaze and gaze at nature and at men who came in the mornings from the neighborhood for their bath in the tank below the room; at the shadow under the banyan tree in the silence and solitude of the afternoon, at the mysterious region, the old world dreamland, at that something undreamt of which was lurking everywhere and at the beings whom it was not possible to express in intelligible language and above all at the limitless thing call the Outside which stretched like the family and the house, beyond his reach. There was no way of meeting between the Outside, which was free, and the child, which was bound because of the bars and the shutters. Thus, he was left to himself, to find his own way, to fall back upon himself. Lonely as he was, missing the happiness of familial love, he found happiness in his own company. Unlucky as he was, missing the joy of physical freedom, he found joy in his spiritual freedom - the joy that is in the sense of mystery in the world outside and in the sense of wonder within himself, which he treasured and cherished till the end of his life and which guided him every moment of his long life in his growth, both as a man and as a poet.

When Tagore grew to be a boy, the members of his family recognized his existence and felt his presence in the house. They began to take him seriously - especially his father, his mother, his brother, Jyotirindranath and his sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi. He had his first outing in 1871, when he was 10. He, with some members of his family took shelter, because of an epidemic in Calcutta, in a villa in nearby village on the bank of Ganges. The river freed him from all bondage and welcomed him into its lap like a friend of a former birth. It was like a new birth. He had come out but not into freedom, he was in a cage, the chain was still there, since going out to the village was forbidden and the Beyond was still shut

out from behind. In 1872 when he was 11, his father, whom he hardly knew as a child, took him to the Himalayas. It is a far cry, a big leap from the servant's quarters to the Himalayas. Although he was a mere boy, his father did not put any check on his wandering. He let him wander about freely, even in the Himalayas for about four long months, where he was free to move where he chose. Just as his father let him wander anywhere in the mountains, so in the quest of truth he left him free to choose his path in the mountains of the mind. His father, till the end of his life, never stood in the way of his freedom. Those four months in the Himalayas were the happiest time and the richest experience of his life. The spirit of his father was the greatest guide in his spiritual growth - the growth of his spiritual freedom.

As a boy Tagore enjoyed one great advantage, namely the liberty in the artistic atmosphere that pervaded the house, the atmosphere permeated with the spirit of creativity. Tagore family was a beehive of artistic activities, with so many gifted members - some were poets, some playwrights, some painters, some musicians and some scholars. Their influence on Tagore was deep, subtle and lasting. Thus, he could relate his inner world with the outer artistic world.

Jyotirindranath, his eccentric, maverick elder brother, 12 years his senior, was a versatile genius. He was a man of many parts- a poet, a playwright, a born musician, a patriot and what not. He was Tagore's mentor. Music was their common love. Tagore learnt his first lesson in music, in setting words to music from him. This apprenticeship in music was eventually [going] to [mature] in an amazing mastering. This seed sown now, was to blossom later into a rich harvest - perhaps the richest in world literature - [of] 2000 songs. Jyotirindranath was more a friend than an elder brother. He gave Tagore the gift of freedom which no one else could or would have dared to give. He unreservedly let him go his own way to self-knowledge. The spirit of Jyotirindranath was the greatest guide in Tagore's intellectual growth.

Kadambari Devi, Jyotirindranath's wife, born in 1859, was a little older than Tagore, by almost 2 years. She came into Tagore's family as a bride in 1868, at the age of 9. Childless and lonely as she was, she gave, after the death of Tagore's mother in 1875, to the 14 years old motherless and lonely boy, both home and hearth. She was a woman of keen sense and sharp sensibility. She was a great lover of literature - particularly Bengali poetry. Tagore was a partner in her literary enterprises - literature, particularly poetry was the common love. She read almost everything that Tagore wrote. Tagore dedicated six volumes of his poetry to her- 4 while she was alive and 2 after her death. Also, he wrote many poems about her, including the famous 'Chhabi' and portrayed her symbolically in many paintings. He nicknamed her as Hecate after the great goddess of night. He immortalized her in his greatest semi-autobiographical short story 'Nashatanid'. There was a spiritual intimacy, an elective affinity between them. Their relationship lasted for 16 years. It was not of this world. It was a relationship for which there is no name. For Tagore it had a meaning and value which is too deep for words. She died in 1884 at the age of 25, when Tagore was 23. Her sudden mysterious death was the greatest tragedy in Tagore's life. It was a tragedy which is too deep for tears. No mortal before or after, has given to Tagore what she has given. (After her death he felt utterly lost, utterly bewildered. A bottomless chasm of darkness drew him to its brink. Yet in the midst of this darkness, he had sudden wonderful revelation. Since death revealed to him that life was not everlasting, life is liberated through death. After this experience of freedom, a great peace fell on his spirit. He saw both life and death in their true perspective. It gave him distance and detachment to see life and world in their wholeness. This picture of life on the vast canvas of death seemed to him truly beautiful.) The spirit of Kadambari Devi was the greatest guide in Tagore's emotional growth. Let us listen to Tagore himself on this greatest tragedy of his life:

'The acquaintance which I made with Death at the age of 24 was a permanent one and its blow has continued to add itself to each

succeeding bereavement in an ever-lengthening chain of tears...

That there could be any gap in the unbroken procession of the joys and sorrows of life was a thing I had no idea of. I could therefore see nothing beyond, and this life I had accepted as all in all. When of a sudden death came, and in a moment made a gaping rent in its smooth-seeming fabric, I was utterly bewildered. All around, the trees, the soil, the water, the sun, the moon, the stars remained as immovably true as before, and yet the person who was as truly here, who, through a thousand points of contact with life, mind and heart, was ever so much more true for me, had vanished in a moment like a dream. What perplexing self-contradiction it all seemed to me as I looked around! How was I ever to reconcile that which remained with that which had gone?

The terrible darkness which was disclosed to me through this rent, continued to attract me night and day as time went on...

And yet in the midst of this unbearable grief, flashes of joy seemed to sparkle in my mind, now and again in a way which quite surprised me. That life was not a stable permanent fixture was itself the sorrowful tidings which helped to lighten my mind. That we were not prisoners forever within a solid stone wall of life was the thought which unconsciously kept coming uppermost in rushes of gladness. That which I had held I was made to let go - this was the sense of loss which distressed me, but when at the same moment I viewed it from the standpoint of freedom gained, a great peace fell upon me.

The all-pervading pressure of worldly existence compensates itself by balancing life against death, and thus it does not crush us. The terrible weight of an unopposed life-force has not to be endured by men - this truth came upon me that day as a sudden, wonderful revelation. With the loosening of the attraction of the world, the beauty of nature took on for me a deeper meaning. Death had given me the correct perspective from which to perceive the world in the fulness of its beauty, and as I saw the picture of the Universe against the background of Death, I found it entrancing.'

In Tgaore's love life there was only one Kadambari Devi. No other mortal and replace her, let alone remove her form his heart, not even Victoria Ocampo, who loved him and longed for his love. In 1925, Tagore wrote to her, 'You have found me homesick...it was for that abiding reality in me in which I have my inner freedom... I have often said to you that I am not free to give up my freedom - for this freedom is claimed by my Master for his own service.' A little later he also wrote to his friend Leonard Elmhirst, 'I carry an infinite space of loneliness around my soul through which the voice of my personal life very often does not reach my friends - for which I suffer more than they do. I have my yearning for the personal world as much as any other mortal, or perhaps more.' It reveals what value and meaning this spiritual freedom and this loneliness had for Tagore. They are revealed in the life that he lived and in the poetry that he wrote. After the greatest tragedy and the revelation in 1884, Tagore had dedicated his spiritual freedom to his 'Jivan-Devata', to the Lord of his life and devoted his life and work to his service.

It should also be mentioned here that after Kadambari Devi's death in 1884 and before Tagore wrote 'Dak Ghar' and also 'Gitanjali' in 191[0], there were four deaths in his own family. His wife, Mrinalini Devi, died in 1902. His daughter, Renuka, in 1903, his father in 1905 and his younger son, Shamindra, in 1907.

In 1882, when Tagore was 21, he had a vision, a realization, a revelation, a spiritual experience, when he stayed for a while with his elder brother Jyotirindranath and his wife Kadambari Devi at their rented house in Calcutta. He has narrated it in his Oxford lectures, *The Religion of Man*. 'A sudden spring breeze of religious experience for the first time came to my life and passed away leaving in my memory a direct message of spiritual reality. One day while I stood watching at early dawn the sun sending out its rays from behind the trees, I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy. The invisible screen of the commonplace was removed from all things and all men and their ultimate significance was intensified in my mind and this is the

definition of beauty. That which was memorable in this experience was its human message, the sudden expansion of my consciousness in super-personal world of man. The poem I wrote on the first day of the surprise was named 'The Awakening of the Waterfall: The waterfall whose spirit lay dormant in its ice-bound isolation was touched by the sun, and bursting in as cataract of freedom it found its finality in an unending sacrifice in a continual union with the sea. After four days, the vision passed away, and the lid hung down upon my inner sight. In the dark, the world once again put on its disguise of the obscurity of an ordinary fact.' In his 'Reminiscences' he also narrates, 'The poem came to an end, but the curtain did not fall upon the joy aspect of the Universe. And it came to be so that no person or thing in the world seemed to me trivial or unpleasing... From infancy I had seen only with my eyes, I now began to see with the whole of my consciousness, I could not look upon the sight of two smiling youths, nonchalantly going their way, the arm of one on the other's shoulder, as a matter of small moment for through it I could see the fathomless depths of the eternal spring of joy.'

The vision, which otherwise could be called common, was so uncommon because of its intensity and its impact. It was a prolonged experience of profound significance. Tagore began to see and hear everything not only with his eyes and ears but with his entire being, everything and everybody seemed to be an endless wonder. No object and no person are unimportant and uninteresting in this world. Nothing and nobody are common or commonplace. Everything and everybody are unique and uncommon. As Tagore illustrates, a person passing by him, a bore who bothers him, a cow which licks its calf, a mother who suckles her child - all are a source of sublime beauty and supreme joy.

Tagore was a man of religion, his religion was a religion of man, a poet's religion. He says, in his Oxford lecture - 'The Religion of Man', 'My religion is a poet's religion. All I feel about it is from vision and not from knowledge.' It was an extension of his personality. It was rooted in his personal experience, in his lived life. It was one individual's personal religion. It was not founded or

fostered by any ideology or institution, by any doxy or dogma, either by Hinduism or even by Brahmoism. He was neither a philosopher nor a theologian, he was a visionary. Even as a boy he went to 4 schools and hated all of them. At 14, he was a dropout. He was self-schooled and self-taught like Keats or like Shakespeare or like any great poet for that matter. His God was a personalized God, an internalized God. He never visited a temple and never worshipped an idol. God has identified himself with his creation- with all that is there, with the entire universe, with nature and men. He moves, he is near, he is within all. His creation is his choice and his will, it is his freedom and his joy. It is his supreme sacrifice. Thus, the creator and his creation are one. This unity of the Creator and his creation is the unity of his creative personality, his creative spirit. This unity is reality, is truth. This unity is the source of sublime beauty and supreme joy. Love is the secret of this unity. Man is to rejoice in this unity with the spirit of self-sacrifice and self-surrender with detachment and disinterestedness. This humanity of God and divinity of men are the most essential elements in Tagore's religion. Man is exalted to and equated with God's power and glory, with God himself - तत्त्वमसि, अहम् ब्रह्मास्मि, सो\_हम्. But God is equivocal. Words cannot reach him; mind cannot comprehend him. He moves not, he is far, he is outside all, outside nature and man also. He is 'Udasin', detached and disinterested, aloof and alien. Therefore, when this unity is destroyed and broken into parts, fractured into fragments, each part, each fragment is maya, an illusion, is *mithya* and *chhalana*, a deceit and a delusion, then life is no life, it is death. The unity, the creative personality, the creative spirit which is at work in the creation was at work in Tagore's life and work. His aesthetics have their roots in this unity. In Tagore, his religion and his poetry are inextricably interwoven. But he was not a religious poet, nor was he a mystic or a saint. God revealed himself to Tagore as 'Jivan Devata'. He was his 'Panthjaner Sakha', a fellow wayfarer, a fellow traveller, a constant companion in his journey in this life and his journey after death. He was both his master and his friend. Here is Tagore on his religion:

‘Its touch comes to me through the same unseen and trackless channel as does the inspiration of my songs. My religious life has followed the same mysterious line of growth as has my poetical life.’

‘I felt sure that some Being who comprehended me, and my world was seeking his best expression in all my experience.’

‘To this Being I was responsible, for the creation in me is his as well as mine.’

‘I felt that I had found my religion at last, the religion of Men, in which the Infinite became defined in humanity and came close to me so as to need my love and co-operation.’

There are two major sources of inspiration-the Upanishads and Kalidas- and many minor ones- the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Buddhist scriptures, the medieval Bengali Vaishnav poets, the bauls, the mystics, the Sufis, the folklore, even the nursery rhymes as well as English literature especially the Romantic poets - both for Tagore as a man and as a poet, both for his life and his work. But none can explain, let alone explain away, Tagore as a man and as a poet, Tagore’s life and work. Even when all is said and done for these major and minor sources of inspiration, it remains to be repeated what was stated at the beginning of this lecture that the fountain head of inspiration both for Tagore as a man and as a poet, both for his life and work was in his own spiritual personality which is inexplicable and therefore ineffable.

On the firm foundation of his spiritual personality - his experience of loneliness in childhood, his experience of death in youth and his experience of the poet’s religion throughout his long life - the edifice of his vision of life and death was erected. Tagore’s vision of life and death has found its full expression and its final embodiment in ‘Dak Ghar’.

Tagore wrote ‘Dak Ghar’ in September 1912 at the age of 61. It was published in 1912. It was performed in 1917 in ‘Vichitrabhanan’, a large room at Jorasanko. Tagore had composed 4 songs specially for this production. He played the parts of the fakir and the

watchman. Only one performance was scheduled but the demand was so great that seven were given, the last in the presence of Mahatma Gandhi. It was translated into English by Debabrata Mukharjee under the title 'The Post Office' and was performed in Dublin and London [at the behest of the Irish poet, W. B. Yeats] in July 1913. It was published by Cuala Press, Dublin, and later by Macmillan & Co., London in 1914 with a two-page preface by W.B. Yeats. It was performed in Berlin in German in 1921, in Stockholm in Swedish in 1921, in Prague in Czech in 1926, in Warsaw Ghetto by the Jews in Polish in 1942, in Rio di Janeiro in Portuguese in 1947. It was translated into Spanish by Zenobia, wife of the Nobel Prize winning poet Jimenez, with his help in 1914. It was translated into French by another Nobel Prize winning author, Andre Gide in 1914, along with 'Gitanjali' and was broadcast on Radio France in June 1940, the evening before Paris fell. Obviously, 'Dak Ghar' is now a world classic. It occupies a special niche in Tagore's worldwide reputation.

'Dak Ghar' is a short play in 3 acts. In English version there are 2 acts - Acts I and II of the original Bengali version are presented as Act I and Act III as Act II.

Act I presents the exposition of the plot, the enunciation of the theme. Amal Gupta, the 5-year-old child-hero is an orphan adopted by Madhav Datta, the monied man in a small town at the instance of his childless wife. Earlier money was a passion with Madhav, but it had no purpose since there was no one to inherit it, so he hated making money. Now that he makes it for Amal, it is a joy for him to make money. This sweet and charming child has won over his heart and bequeathed happiness to him even before the play begins. But it is a sad irony that Amal is very sick and there is not much hope for his life. The family physician, the Kaviraj, is a prude and a pedant, a pseudo scholar and a phony man of learning, who has memorized all the medical scriptures and quotes them ad nauseum. He has scared the guardian that the child would die if exposed to the elements - air and light. Amal, therefore, is shut up in a lonely dark room away from air and light. Thakurda comes and assures Madhav

that he knows not only the game of getting children out of doors but also the other game of keeping them indoors. So, he could help him, he would come and make friends with the child. Amal comes and says he longs to go out and see everything, to go beyond the far away hills, to wander like the mad man in search of work whom he has met the previous day and not stay at home, read books and be a learned man like the Kaviraj. Madhav warns him not to call and talk to strangers lest they kidnap him. Amal thinks it would be splendid if they did but is sorry that nobody does so.

Amal symbolizes every man who has [the soul of] a child - everyone whose soul has received the call of the open road, Madhav, the family and Kaviraj, the society. Madhav and the Kaviraj fear death because there 'I' seeks gains- money and knowledge - that cannot be assimilated with its spirit and is not able to say, 'All my work is thine'. To be exposed to air and light is life, not to be exposed to air and light is death, yet Madhav and the Kaviraj think to be exposed to air and light is death- this is a greater irony in Act I.

Act II presents Tagore's vision of life. Amal sits near a window in the lonely dark room. In Act I he enters the room, which means he can still walk. Now perhaps he cannot. He is gracefully gliding into his death. In front of the window is an open road. Because he cannot go out into the world, he invites the world to his window. If sit he must, share also he must. A dairyman, a watchman, a Headman, Sudha, the flower girl and a group of boys pass by his window on the road. He calls all of them to his window and talks with them. He tells all of them - except the Headman, that he cannot go out, he sits by the window all day because the Kaviraj, the family physician, will not let him out. He wants to know from all of them who they are, where they came from, where they go, and what they do. He would like to go with all of them, when he is well. He would like to learn [from the dairyman] to cry curds and to sell it, [from the watchman] to strike and sound the gong and to tell people the time, [from Sudha] to pick flowers and sell them. He would not like to sit at home, read books and be a learned man. He wants to be so many

persons and wants to learn so much from so many persons. He wants to go everywhere, to do everything and be everyone.

Amal is a child and as such he has an inborn, an inherent wanderlust in him. He has a sense of wonder and mystery. He lives not in the world of logic, but in the world of magic, in the world of senses and imagination, not in the world of thought, but in the world of feeling.

The persons who pass by his window on the road symbolize the common run of humanity, the ordinary persons, humble, honest and hard working. They are a cavalcade, a precession of mankind, they symbolize all human beings. Significantly, the dairyman, the watchman and the boys do not bear any name, they are anonymous. They are practical and prosaic, their professions are for them merely the sources of their livelihood, of their existence. Amal has a poet's sensibility, he feels joy, an instinctive and instant joy in their work and makes them feel it. He has a poet's imagination, he sees beauty, a supreme and sublime beauty in their natural habitat and makes them see it. He gives them sight and insight. He gives value and meaning to their life and work. He describes the village of the dairyman in minute details vividly and precisely. He has not seen it and yet he sees it with the eye of imagination, the dairyman has seen it and yet Amal makes him think that he has not seen it. He makes all of them feel happy and feels happy himself in their happiness, he is so detached and disinterested. He has an irresistible and irrepressible desire to be one with man and nature, to identify himself with them. Not being able to live physically, he lives mentally and imaginatively, he lives poetically. Isolation is imposed on him, loneliness is inflicted on him by nature and man, his longings are repressed, his yearnings are suppressed, it has quickened his pulse, sharpened his sensibility, fired his imagination, intensified his instincts, heightened his desire to live. He lives a life of excitement and enthusiasm, of eagerness and anxiousness, of curiosity and inquisitions, he lives a life of gusto and passion. Being stuck to one time and rooted to one place, he is restless [and] has a pining not only for here and now but for the great beyond, the far-

to-see, for the farthest end. He is *chanchal*, he is *sudurer piyasi*. Amal is not a child; he is all soul. He is a symbol of innocence, tenderness and gentleness.

Act II anticipates Act III. He learns from the watchman that the big house on the other side where there is a flag flying up and people go in and come out is the King's new Post Office. He also learns from him that there may be a letter for him from the King through his postman since it is in front of his window. He may have a letter every day, and he would read them when he grows old. He also learns from the watchman who strikes and sounds the gong to tell people that time waits for none, it goes on forever. Everything and everyone will go away with time. All will have to go to the land of death, all will have to die. He learns about the tears in things. He wants to go to that land and not be in a lonely dark room, but the physician will not let him go. The watchman says another physician, a greater one will come and let him go to that land. Amal requests the headman to tell the postman in case he does not know him that one who sits by the window is Amal. The headman sarcastically says to him that he will have the letter next day or may be this very day. He also requests the boys to bring the postman to him next day so that the postman may know him in case there is a letter for him from the King. How eagerly and anxiously he waits for the letter which ironically comes. Amal requests Sudha to bring a flower for him when she comes to him next. She promises that she will. He also requests her not to forget him. She promises that she will not. She brings the flower at the end of the play, ironically when he is already dead.

Act III presents Tagore's vision of death. Amal is now in bed. In Act I he walks, in Act II he sits near the window, now he is in bed. He is sick not because the family physician says so in Act I, but because he and others also say so in Act II. The watchman describes his sickness and he himself says to the boys that he has pain and he feels sleepy. Thakurda comes in Fakir's guise after visiting the Isle of Parrots, a land of wonders where there are no men but only birds who do not speak or walk but only sing and fly. Fakir describes the

heavenly beauty of the Isle at length. Amal wants to be a bird and go to the Isle when he is well. Amal asks the Fakir if the King has sent him a letter [from] the Post Office. Fakir answers that it has started, it is on its way, the Postman has already left and is coming near to him. Amal describes the journey of the Postman at length like he described the Dairyman's village in Act II. Postman himself could not have described it so vividly and precisely. Amal does it without making the journey. Amal asks the Fakir if he personally knows the King. Fakir answers that he does, since he goes to him for his alms. Amal wants to go to the King with the Fakir for his alms. He will request the king to make him his postman and he will deliver king's letters from door to door. He will stay at home to receive king's letter when it comes. He wonders if he will be able to make out what will be in king's letter, since he does not know how to read. In the meantime, the Headman has anonymously informed the King about the impunity of Madhav and the impudence of Amal in spreading the rumors that the king is to send him his letter. The Fakir assures Amal that the king's letter will come today. Amal feels the darkness coming over his eyes, everything seems like a dream to him. The family physician asks Madhav to lock the front door and shut the window. Madhav expects that Amal is asleep. They fear Amal might die. The Headman, to hurt and humiliate Amal further, tells him that there is a letter for him from the King. Amal cannot believe it. He wonders if it is the King's letter. The Headman gives a blank piece of paper and says this is the letter. The Fakir sees through the mean and malicious mischief of the Headman and confirms that it is the king's letter. It all looks blank to Amal [and he] asks the headman what there is in the letter. The Headman says that the king writes in his letter that he is to call on Amal shortly, the king will come himself to see Amal with his State Physician. Amal wants to wipe the dust off the Headman's feet for bringing the letter. By now the evening star is up, but Amal can't see it. At this, the king's Herald smashes the door and comes into the room and informs Amal that the king is to come at night and has sent him greatest physician to attend on his young friend. The state physician comes

and asks to open wide all the doors and windows. Amal says that all his pain is gone and now can see all the stars twinkling from the other side of the dark. The state physician does not want the Headman in the room. Amal says that he is a friend, he has brought him the king's letter, he could be in the room. Sleep comes over Amal. The state physician asks all to be quiet, sits by Amal's pillow. Amal falls asleep. The state physician asks to blow out the oil lamp and only the starlight streams in. Madhav stands in silence. The Fakir stands in prayer with folded hands like a statue. At this solemn moment Sudha comes silently with flowers, places them into Amal's hands and asks when he will be awake. The state physician answers that he will be awake as soon as the king comes and calls him. Sudha asks the state physician to whisper a word for her in Amal's ear that Sudha has not forgotten him.

In 1921 when 'Dak Ghar' was performed in German in Berlin, Tagore was present in the audience. There was a controversy about the different interpretation of the play in its German version and its performance - Is 'Dak Ghar' a fairy tale or a spiritual play, which Tagore could not define at the time. Later on, he tried to explain the meaning in a letter, 'I remember, at the time I wrote it, my own feeling which inspired me to write it. Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the open road... But there is the post office in front of his window and Amal waits for the king's letter to come to him directly from the king, bringing to him the message of emancipation. At last the closed gate is opened by the king's own physician and that which is 'death' to the world of hoarded wealth and certified creeds brings him awakening in the world of spiritual freedom. The only thing that accompanies him in his awakening is the flowers of love given to him by Sudha.'

Life is a unity of the creator and his creation, nature and man. This unity is a reality, is truth, is a source of joy and beauty. Love is the secret of this unity. One who lives the life of unity rejoices in the creation - in nature and man and the spirit of sacrifices and self-surrender, in the spirit of detachment and disinterestedness like Amal. Such a one does not fear death. For such a one death is an

awakening into spiritual freedom, a deliverance from life into a greater life. For such a one life and death are one. In this greater life one knows at the end, the great unknown.

One who does not live the life of this unity because of one's vanity and voracity, one's greed and avarice - greed for hoarded wealth and certified creed, avarice for self and power like Madhav and the Kaviraj, and lives the life of disunity, the life of Maya and *Mithya* - illusion and unreality, as if life is one's own personal and private property, fears death. For such a one, death is the opposite of life.

W. B. Yeats in his short two page preface to the English version of 'Dak Ghar' says, 'The deliverance sought and won by the dying child is the same deliverance which rose before his imagination, Mr. Tagore has said, when once in the early dawn he heard, amid the noise of a crowd returning from some festival, this line out of an old village song, 'Ferryman, take me to the other shore of the river.' It may come at any moment of life, though the child discovers it in death for it always comes at the moment when the 'I' seeking no longer for gain that cannot be assimilated with its spirit, is able to say, 'All my work is thine.' He refers the reader to Tagore's paper 'The Realization of the Infinite' published in 'Sadhana' in 1913. Tagore in this paper says

'I can never forget that scrap of song I once heard in the early dawn in the midst of the din of the crowd that had collected for a festival the night before, 'Ferryman take me across to the other shore.'

In the bustle of all our work there comes out this cry, 'take me across.' ...

What is the meaning of this cry?...

In truth, thou ocean of joy, this shore and the other shore are one and the same in thee. When I called this my own, the other lies estranged; and missing the sense of that completeness which is in

me, my heart incessantly cries out for the other. All my this, and that other, are waiting to be completely reconciled in thy love.

This 'I' of mine toils hard, day and night, for a home which it knows as its own. Alas, there will be no end of its sufferings so long as it is not able to call this home thine. Till then it will struggle on, and its heart will ever cry, 'Ferryman, lead me across.' When this home of mine is made thine, that very moment it is taken across, even while its old walls enclose it. This 'I' is restless. It is working for a gain which can never be assimilated with its spirit, which it never can hold and retain. In its efforts to clasp in its own arms that which is for all, it hurts others and is hurt in its turn and cries, 'Lead me across'. But as soon as it is able to say, 'All my work is thine' everything remains the same, only it is taken across.'

Tagore was a born outsider, a total outcast and at times even an outlaw, who was '*ritibandhaner baire*' - outside the rigidity of rules. In one of his poems he says, 'Where the roads are made, I lose my way'. He was essentially a solitary, a person, and individual. He was singularly qualified to say, 'I do not invite you to my house, for it is small; I invite you to my loneliness for it is vast.' In one of his poems he calls himself a '*panthajan*' - a wayfarer. In another poem he says, '*pather shesh nai je, shesher katha ke bolbe?*' - the path has no end who shall speak about the end? He was a wayfarer for whom life was a '*chir jatra*' - a journey without end, an eternal journey. It had no full stop, not even in death. In another poem he says, '*ami sudurer piyasi*' - I long for the great beyond. He was a wayfarer to the great further. Like Amal in 'Dak Ghar', his soul had received the call of the open road. In his requiem '*samukhe shanti parabar*' - in front lies the ocean of peace - he longs to know the great unknown. In 'Balaka' he says, 'Not here, not here, somewhere far away.' He was an exile on earth. His life was a flight of the wild swan for the forlorn, nostalgia for nowhere. For him life did not mean only 'here and now', it also meant 'not yet' and 'yet to be'. When he died, he was a child of 80. He was a '*chir shishu*' - an eternal child - like his Amal. He was a child soul with all its innocence and instinctive joy and with all its sense of wonder and mystery intact till the end of his life, in spite of

the deep and dark abyss of nothingness that opened when he was close to his death. He called himself the poet of the earth – '*ami pruthibir kabi*'. Yet in his early twenties, displeased with himself and disgusted with the fanaticism of both the Hindus and the Brahmos, he, amusingly said to himself, 'Much rather...would I be an Arab Bedouin.' Again, in his poem '*Durant Asha*' - 'Wild Hope'- he said, 'O that I were an Arab Bedouin.' In his mid-40s, equally disgusted with the violence during the '*Bang Bhang*' and '*Swadeshi*' movement which he inspired and which inspired him to play a prominent part by writing 23 spiritual songs and even leading processions in the streets, he withdraw from it after a little while saying to himself '*ekla chalo*' - walk alone. He did walk alone but did not withdraw into silence. He wrote two eloquent political novels, '*Ghare Bahire*' - The home and the world - and the greatest masterpiece - '*Gora*' - and served his country and his countryman in the best way, perhaps in the only way in which a great poet can serve them. At the same time when heinous crimes were committed against humanity at home or in the world he went into an action. In 1919 as a protest against the Amritsar massacre at Jalianawla he returned his knighthood. In 1941 when Miss Eleanor Rathbone wrote an open letter to Indians for helping the British in fighting the Nazis, he made a strong statement against the British betrayal of Indians, since all Indian leader were in the British prisons. On 14<sup>th</sup> April 1941, a few days before he died his final testament, his '*cri de coeur*' was read out in his presence at Shantiniketan since he was too weak to read it himself. [This was] his passionate cry against the brutality and the barbarism of the West during World War II. He says, 'As I look around, I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in man.' He was a wayfarer who walked alone all his life with only his God, his Jivan Devata as his '*panthjaner sakha*' - as his companion.

'*Ami Chanchal*' - I am restless - says Tagore in a famous poem. He was possessed by '*asim byakulta*' - by a boundless restlessness. He was irresistibly and irrepressibly restless till the end of his life. He loved flowing rivers and open fields. He never settled down, he

never stayed in one place. He moved from one house to another from time to time, especially after his foreign tours ended in 1932. He toured all around India and all around the world. After 1913 he made 10 foreign tours during some of [which] he moved from one country to another to deliver his message of universal humanism and to denounce the menace of petty patriotism and narrow nationalism. His foreign tours ended in 1932 only due to old age and lack of money. In his creative writings he moved from one form to another, from one style to another, from one theme to another. There is an amazing variety - *bichitrata* - and an awe-inspiring volume - *bipulta* - in his opus of 26 tomes - and many posthumous titles. He expresses himself through many arts - dance, drama, music and painting. He set 2000 songs to music and in late life made 2500 paintings.

(In Tagore's later poetry, especially in the 'Last [Q]uartet' as well as in his paintings, a dark abyss of nothingness gaped at him, a stark chasm of negation stared at him. There is an assertion of '*chhalana*' - deceit, and admission of '*prabanchana*' - delusion and awareness of '*maya*' - illusion and acceptance of '*kathin*' - the difficult. It poses a question mark to his earlier poetry. God seems to be outside all - outside nature and man. He seems to be '*udasin*' - detached and disinterested, aloof and alien. He seems to be equivocal. As an inevitable and inescapable consequence, so seems nature - in spite of all its beauty and all its joy. Man seems to be severed and separated from supreme reality and condemned and consigned to '*maya*' - illusion and ignorance, to incoherence and incomprehension. There is, therefore, bafflement and bewilderment. Since self-knowledge and self-realization elude and evade him, there is a self-exposure, a self-disclosure. Everything seems to be purposeless and meaningless. There is an order which the rational mind of a moralist and an idealist has conceived and constricted but one needs to pierce and penetrate, pray and probe through that order which it has obscured and obstructed. Thus Tagore stands at '*Prantik*' - 'The borderland' of the near and the far, the seen and the unseen, the within and the without, at the edge of a chasm, at the

brink of an abyss, which he does not explode and explore, since words cannot reach there and mind cannot comprehend it. Had he done so, there would have been no poetry, no song, there would have been only silence. He admitted 'It requires a good deal of courage to be what I truly am.' He confessed, 'I know that I have failed, and my poems have failed to reach all.' Since man's life is created in collaboration and cooperation between man and God, till man is \_\_\_\_\_ at every step and at every stage, his life is incomplete. In that sense his life is a failure. Had he had the courage to be what truly he was even then, who knows, perhaps he would have failed, the poems would have failed to reach all, since God is also outside his creation, outside all. All is unreachable. If he has failed, his failure has more value and where no one succeeded his failure has more value and more meaning than many other men's so-called success.

In his later poetry he does not state or restate his religion of Man. One does not see the familiar face of the Gurudev, one only sees the stark and strange face of an unknown Tagore which one sees in his self-portraits, in his paintings. One does not hear the eloquent and emphatic voice, the familiar voice of the poet of 'Geetanjali' there are no strong statements, there are only subtle suggestions. The artist and not the moralist or the idealist, speaks in it. One does not, cannot and should not read it as poetry. There is no poetry in it. There are no meters and no rhymes in it. There is no wit and no wisdom in it, there is only simplicity and spontaneity one only hears a human voice - all too human in its humanity and honesty.

In his later poetry he does not recant or reject, disown or depreciate his earlier romantic poetry. He only exposes it to the modern world - the world of crisis in civilization, identifies and involves his own agony and agnosticism with that of modern world - and enriches it with a new dimension and a new ethos. It is the poetry of existential experience. It is Tagore's '*Nasadiya Suktam*'. His later poetry is modern in its sensibility and style. There is an un-Tagorean Tagore in it. But this un-Tagorean Tagore also is Tagore.

There is no one single Tagore. There are several Tagores - '*Nana Rabindranath*' - as he himself claimed. There is a diversity in his earlier and later poetry, yet there is an inner unity in them. There is a difference, but there is no discontinuity in them. They are not contradictory; they are only complementary to each other.)

In '*Sonar Tari*' - The Golden Boat, Tagore's Jivan Devata takes all on his boat and leaves him sad and alone on the riverbank. The Ishopanishad in the first verse says that God is within all and the fifth verse says that the same God who is within all is outside all also. Tagore's personality was a microcosm of his Jivan Devata or of Ishopanishad's God. He was a complete man, a comprehensive soul as it is possible for man to be so in this life and in this world. Such a sublime soul rarely comes into our frail and fragile world. There are many complexities and contradiction on the surface in his life and work, which are subtly and strangely reconciled and resolved beneath the surface. No one can see him steadily and see him whole. He is not to be found in his action or in his words as he himself warned. He eludes and exceeds both. He lived a life of allegory. The biography of the inner man will never be written. The man and the poet are a challenge, an enigma, a puzzle, a riddle, a mystery. Others abide our question, he is free. One may ask and ask, he is silent. Who is Tagore? Does anyone know him? Can anyone know him? Did he know himself? Could he know himself? In the last poem of his life in '*Shesh Lekha*' the first day's sun asks, 'who are you?' and the last day's sun also asked, 'who are you?' No answer comes. There were no answers, there is no answer and there will be no answer. Did he not ask - *ke amare chine chhe martyaloke* - who in this mortal world knows me? Did he not answer - '*nai ba bujhibe more! Chirkal chokhe chokhe nutan puratan loke, path kare ratridin dhare*' - no one will know me? One may try for ever, in times old and now, but no one will know me. Only the Great Unknown knows Tagore.