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Relevance of the Vedas in Understanding the use of 'Night' and 'Darkness' in Tagore's Poetry

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The Vedas were the earliest source of all that is civilization as also the spirituality and religious outlook called 'Indian'. It is said, "The Vedas gave us the first types and figures of these things as seen and formed by an imaged spiritual intuition and physiological and religious experience..."! Indeed, in spite of the changes, which may have taken place at latter times in the course of the evolution of Indian literature—that 'primordial insight', or that 'primal perception' of the Vedas has been ever-present like the hidden flow of the river Falgu. It is further said, "There is a persistency, a continuity of the Indian mind in its literary creation in spite of great changes as consistent as that which we find in painting and sculpture." This is why the relevance of the Vedas in comprehending the significance of the modern art and culture of India cannot be denied. Viewed from this angle, there is little doubt that the influence of the Vedas should be potent in the poetical trends set forth by the most representative poet of India, Rabindranath Tagore. Speaking about how the heritage of Vedic perception and its evolution has been active in the poetic consciousness of Rabindranath Sri Aurobindo comments, "it is in fact the beginning of a form of symbolic or figurative imagery for the poetic expression of spiritual experience which reappears constantly in later Indian writing, the figures of the Tantras and Puranas, the figures of the Vaishnavas, one might add even a certain element in the modern poetry of Tagore..."

In the wide expanse of Rabindranath's creation the influence of the Vedas has occurred in various ways and, directly or indirectly, it is noticeable almost everywhere. In this limited purview of ours we shall attempt to demonstrate how in Tagore's poetry the thought of 'Darkness' and 'Night' has manifested itself and how this thought resembles the thought of the Vedas. It may be mentioned that Aryans were the worshippers of light—'arya jyotiragrah'. The chief objective of the Vedic culture and spiritual pursuit was crossing over from darkness to light. So, the Vedas are very much vocal in the worship of the Sun. In their devotional prayer to light has been invariably expressed in various ways and in their realization an intense feeling of a resplendent world has been captured.

ud vayam tamassa pari jyotis pasyanta uttaram/
devam devatra suryam agnam ja byotir uttamaṁ/
'Crossing the spheres of darkness we rise to greater and still greater heights, we begin to see the spheres of light, the great light, the divine sun which is the light of all lights.'

However, side by side with 'light' the subject of darkness has also come as it has come, for instant, in the incantation quoted by us; and generally it has been used suggestively for ignorance, non being, dead (as opposed to 'immortal'). The seer of Brihadaranyakya has prayed—

asato ma sadgama / tamaso ma jyotiramgamaya /
'mrityorjnamam tamam gamaya /'

'From the non-being to true being, from the darkness to the Light, from death to Immortality.'

In the Rigveda also 'crossing over this darkness' has been spoken of: 'atarishma tamassa param asya / prati stomam devayanto dadhanah'—"we have come crossing over darkness singing songs and wanting to see God.' Elsewhere it has been said, 'upa ma pepishattamah krishnam vyaktamastra / usha rineya yataya /'—'Impregnable darkness has appeared all around me, O Usha, wipe it out like my burden of debt.'

Rabindranath has also used the word 'darkness' as the vehicle of different negative ideas of the same kind. Sometimes we see in his poetry, Gitanjali, that the darkness as an obstruction to truth fades out from the eyes of the poet in the shining presence of the poet's object of worship (Verse No.45); at other times we find that 'darkness' has been used to mean ignorance(No.18); again on other occasions the ego or self of the poet has made its place into the darkness of poetic consciousness(No.103). However, apart from the use of 'darkness' in this conventional sense, in Gitanjali itself we come across proofs of the fact that the concept of darkness has had response in Tagore-consciousness with varying suggestiveness and feeling.—

(a) 'When the night is lost in sleep, the sky is wrapped in darkness,
Who then plucks at the strings of my veena
With such resonance!'(No.60)

(b) 'As many times as I go to light the lamp,
It goes out again and again,
In my life your seat is in the depth of darkness.'(No.72)

(c) 'Liberate, O liberate me,
Into your intimate, silent, liberal,
Endless darkness.'(No.95)

That the application of darkness here has not been in the familiar sense is worthy of note. In the first example darkness has acted as an enkindling element. The Resonance has occurred in the Veena of the poet's self at the hour when the sky is 'dark'. When the world is encompassed in darkness, when the poet's eyes the world of forms disappears only then the poet's spiritual feeling produces resonance in the Veena of self-realization striking at the innermost level of consciousness. So, 'darkness' here is an aid to the perception of the form-less. The light for realizing the world through the senses is absent here.

In the subsequent quotations we see that the seat of the Absolute Good for the poet is placed in 'darkness' itself or it is the poet's craving for liberation in darkness. But, it is noteworthy that in spite of having His seat in darkness the Ultimate good of the poet is not darkness Himself. So, it is seen that darkness has only created an atmosphere of the realization of that sense of fullness like the enkindling element and that atmosphere is that of the super natural world. This is but a special state of inner consciousness. When the extraneous restlessness of life force has calmed down, when the desultory mind has plunged into the meditation of that Absolute One,—of that special condition 'darkness' is but a metaphor; or it can be said, as soon as the feeling of 'One' in the poetic consciousness has become strong at that very moment 'darkness' has descended over the external sphere of consciousness. In the depth of his own inner consciousness where the world of matter disappears and the world of intuition shows up, only then the poet has wanted to hear the refrain of that eternal message—

"Piled up words of many days
Shall be washed up in a flash
When all alone shall I here the pipe play on
In endless darkness."(No59)

The appeal of light is to the senses; therefore, the poet has realized—

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"The lamp goes out again and again
As many times as I go to light it;
Thy throne in my life
Is in the darkness deep." (No.72)
The Vedic sages also discovered that effulgent Absolute Being
beyond the domain of 'darkness'—"tamasas parastatam." Here
the darkness is not that of the world of senses, neither is it
the darkness of ignorance— for, the Absolute Being surpasses
both knowledge and ignorance; this darkness is in the inner
consciousness; it is the symbol of the perception of that One
in an all-pervasive colourless state. That Absolute Being
bathed in the glorious light can hardly be comprehended
unless one knows how to plunge into tranquility of the inner
consciousness of the world of intuition.—

'None in the world can see
His light hidden from view;
Concealing it with lapel of His robe
He keeps it burning through out the night.' (No.49)

Standing on the borderline of his life the poet has expressed
these very words in one of his poems emulating the Vedic
sages and in tune with them. In the poem titled 'In the Dusk
of the Fatigued Consciousness', included in his poetry,
'Prantik', the poet has expressed the successive levels of
the plunge into this inner consciousness of the world of
intuition. 'In the dusk of consciousness' while drifting away with
the current of the river the memories garnered throughout
life—heaps of varied feelings of sadness—begin to fade;
'the sound of the evening prayer' from the neighbourhood
grows faint. Gradually ceases the song of the birds who
surrender at the feet of Great Silence. 'In that very hour there
descends a pervading darkness without shape or form over
the vast world of variety, over land and water; being reduced
into a shadow; a dot the body melts away in the endless dark-
ness. But the consciousness of the poet does not get lost in
this endless darkness; because, he is a believer in the positive
Vedic approach to life and so standing all alone in the never-
ending darkness he prays with folded hands 'O Sun, thou
hast taken away thy curtain of rays, now reveal to me thy
kindliest form; I would look upon that self/ Being who is
there in thee and me as one and the same.'

Indeed, we have to take the help of the Vedas in order to
understand Rabindranath's use in these poems of the percep-
tion of 'darkness' in this new sense of the word. The Vedas
were the first to make use of the concept of 'darkness' from
this positive standpoint. It has been said in sage Kushik's
apostrophe on Night: 'nriti evakhyavyayati pruruta devyarkshibhih/
vishtu adhi shriyadhitah.'

'This Night here which is approaching spreading herself all
around and has kept her eyes open in all directions, has ar-
rived as the patron Goddess of all beauty.'

In the Vedas 'Night' and 'Day' have been spoken of as the
two mothers of Truth—'riti jaya matara'—in the language of Sri
Aurobindo 'The two mighty mothers of the Truth with their
fair front to us who increase our being's space.' In this con-
text it has been said, 'Night is tranquility, self-absorption and
'Dawn' or 'Day' (Ushas) is expression and activity. To be ab-
sober in the inner self after gathering up consciousness
in its entirety to gather up and assimilate in the self whatever
has been achieved in the light of the day—this is the work
of the night.' Generally it appears that as if the night is the
opposite of the day or antagonistic to it... but actually it is
not so; 'the night is but a concentrated form of the day it-
self.'

The significance name of the Vedic sage Deergatama also
deserves mention. 'One, who has lived in deep darkness in
the course of a long time, led his expedition in that darkness
and then fire has wiped out his blindness— it is such a one
who is Deergatama.' Biology would describe this Mystic
darkness as the incubation period, the Christian Mystics
would call this 'the dark night of the soul.' Sri Aurobindo
says that it is the Eternal Night preceding the Everlasting
Day (of which the Vedic name is Sakridhata) Rabindranath
has said: 'For the new dawn shall I keep awake through the
long night and the lamp shall not go out.'

About this wonderful 'darkness' out of which all light springs
forth the Upanishad says:

'na latra surya bhuti na chandratarakam/
 nema vidyutu bhanti kutuamagath/
tameva bhantamavahuti sarvam/
tyas bhata sarvanidam vishati/'

'How will Fire have any manifestation there where the Sun
gets no exposure, neither the Moon, nor the stars nor even
the lightening? As he is shining, therefore all these shine;
through his luster all these are variously illumined.'

Rabindranath has spoken about this very darkness in a song of
'Gittimata':

'Drowning the Sun and the Moon
Into the crevices of darkness
The harmony is entering into the dream'
Rabindranath himself had consciously apprehended this
hidden Vedic meaning of the concept of Night or Darkness. In
an article he wrote: 'Light does the work of distancing us
from one another— glaringly determines the limitations of
each one of us.' But 'darkness' in the language of the poet:

'is the secluded supporting place of our love, the continent
of amorous union.' Just as the Vedas say that both 'Day'
and 'Night' are but two mothers of the Truth. In the same
way Rabindranath also says: 'We cannot have the bounded
and the boundless, the self and the universe, the one and
the many simultaneously and completely and so by turn the
day comes to open our eyes and night arrives to open the door
of our heart. Once light comes and forces us to our center and
then darkness comes and begins to make us familiar with our
circumference.' About this darkness the poet's perception is:

'when the child is held in the passionate embrace of its mother
it sees nothing and hears nothing, but only feels the mother
deeply; that feeling is much more authentic than seeing or
hearing likewise, only when silent darkness puts our sight
and hearing at rest do we get to feel deeply the whole univer-
ses and the mother of the Boundless bringing then closely
near to our heart.' So, craving to drown himself in the depth
of relishing his own self the poet prays:

'O, thou kindly open my door
Over the dark sky,
Let the silence of the seven spheres
Come into my abode.' (No.64)

Let there be no more spinning of words for the present, no
more self deception of fragmented feelings, now it is time for
us to relish our dearest one— that which could neither be cap-
tured by words, nor by music pursued with dedication; to-
day, only—His worship will take place—

'Let speech get lost in the silent night
Let my exterior dissipate in itself
And my dearest one appear before me in the undivided form.'
(No.95)

It is the darkness itself as one of the two mothers of
Truth mentioned in the Vedas has been revealed here with a
new suggestiveness. Indeed, looked at from the Vedic point
of view the underlying significance of Rabindranath's appli-
cation of the words 'Darkness' and 'Night' becomes quite
clear. It is as if the Vedas have been captured here in a new
form. Rabindranath has acquired that heritage through the
spiritual pursuit of the Mystic saints of the Middle Age. In
this context, a verse ('dohā') of the Mystic saint, Kabir can be
quoted here: 'The evening deepens, the love of darkness
wraps up the mind and the body, open the door where the
light is setting, get immersed in the love of this wide dark-
ness like this evenings; Let the lotus of consciousness drink
the nectar of the night, let the ripples of love from the bot-
tomless black play in the mind, in the unbounded depth let
the sound of the conch and the bells go on ringing as also the
pipe celebrating the communion of love. - Let that exceeding
beauty brightly manifest in the ocean of darkness.'

The tradition of looking upon everything in this world from
a positive point of view, which started with the Vedas, has
reappeared in a new form by virtue of a touch of Tagore-
genius. It is but in the line or tradition of the Vedic seers that
the words such as 'Night', 'Darkness' also have appeared in
their new meaning surpassing their narrow meanings of the
past. Of course, to understand the real meanings of these one
must go back again to the Vedas alone. Truly speaking, from
the Vedas down to the modern Indian life— the thoughts and
ideas of Indian outlook have all been bounded up by one
link of which the foundation had been laid by the Vedic seers.

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