

RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND THE BHAKTI TRADITION: A CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This research article investigates the Bhakti elements in the works of Rabindranath Tagore, with particular emphasis on *Gitanjali* (1912) and related lyrical compositions. It argues that Tagore's poetry represents a profound continuation and transformation of the Indian Bhakti tradition, integrating Vaishnava devotionalism, Upanishadic philosophy, and modern spiritual humanism.

The study demonstrates that Tagore's conception of the Divine is deeply rooted in Bhakti ideals such as love (*prema*), surrender (*prapatti*), and intimate communion with God, yet it transcends sectarian boundaries. His devotional voice is neither confined to ritualistic orthodoxy nor limited to doctrinal frameworks; instead, it emerges as a universal spiritual experience expressed through poetic imagination.

Drawing upon close textual analysis of *Gitanjali* and other works such as *The Gardener* (1913) and *Fruit-Gathering* (1916), the article establishes that Tagore reinterprets Bhakti as an inward, dynamic, and aesthetic experience. His poetry becomes a sacred offering, where the human soul seeks union with the infinite through humility, longing, and love.

The central argument of this study is that Tagore stands as a modern Bhakti poet, whose works bridge the medieval devotional tradition and contemporary global spirituality, transforming devotion into a universal language of human and divine unity.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore; Bhakti; *Gitanjali*; Devotional Poetry; Mysticism; Vaishnavism; Upanishads; Divine Love; Spiritual Humanism; Indian English Literature

Introduction

The poetry of Rabindranath Tagore occupies a singular position in Indian literature, where the currents of Bhakti, mysticism, and philosophical inquiry converge into a unified artistic expression. Rooted in the cultural and spiritual milieu of Bengal, Tagore inherits the rich legacy of the Bhakti movement, particularly the Vaishnava devotional tradition associated with Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, which emphasized ecstatic love and personal devotion to the Divine. At the same time, Tagore's thought is deeply influenced by the Upanishads, whose non-dualistic vision informs his understanding of the unity between the individual soul and the universal spirit. As he himself notes in *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* (1913), "the infinite in man is not something foreign to him" (Tagore, p. 51). This insight forms the philosophical foundation of his devotional poetry, where Bhakti is not merely emotional expression but a realization of the divine within.

Tagore's *Gitanjali* (London: Macmillan, 1912) stands as the most profound articulation of his devotional vision. Comprising 103 prose poems translated by Tagore himself, the text embodies the essence of Bhakti through its language of prayer, surrender, and longing. In poem 1, Tagore writes: "Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure," expressing the Bhakti idea of the soul as a vessel of divine grace (*Gitanjali*, p. 1). The tone throughout the collection reflects the humility of a devotee addressing a personal yet universal God.

Scholars such as Sabyasachi Bhattacharya have emphasized that Tagore's spirituality cannot be confined to any single tradition. In *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation* (2011), Bhattacharya observes that Tagore's religious vision is "deeply rooted in the Bhakti tradition, yet open to the currents of global humanism" (p. 87). This synthesis enables Tagore to transform devotional poetry into a medium of universal significance.

Furthermore, Tagore's engagement with Vaishnava lyricism, especially the songs of Vidyapati and the Bengali Vaishnava poets, is evident in his portrayal of the Divine as the Beloved. This echoes the Bhakti tradition where the relationship between the soul and God is conceived in intensely

personal and emotional terms. However, Tagore extends this relationship beyond the confines of religious symbolism, presenting it as a universal experience accessible to all humanity.

In addition to Bhakti and Vedantic influences, Tagore's work also resonates with Sufi mysticism, particularly in its emphasis on divine love and the annihilation of the ego. As noted by K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in *Indian Writing in English* (1985), Tagore's poetry represents "a confluence of Bhakti and Sufi streams, unified by the ideal of love as the path to God" (p. 72). This synthesis enriches his devotional voice and broadens its appeal across cultural and religious boundaries.

Thus, Tagore emerges not merely as a poet of devotion but as a philosopher of Bhakti, who redefines the tradition in modern terms. His poetry transforms devotion into an aesthetic and spiritual experience, where the finite self seeks union with the infinite through love, humility, and creative expression. In this sense, Tagore's work stands as a bridge between the medieval Bhakti saints and the modern global consciousness.

The Bhakti Movement: Historical and Philosophical Context

The Bhakti movement, one of the most transformative spiritual currents in Indian civilization, emerged as a powerful response to ritualistic formalism and social stratification. Beginning in the early medieval period and spreading across the Indian subcontinent, Bhakti emphasized personal devotion (bhakti), emotional surrender, and direct communion with the Divine, transcending barriers of caste, creed, and scholasticism.

In Bengal, the Bhakti tradition found one of its most vibrant expressions in the Vaishnava movement led by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1533). His ecstatic devotion to Krishna, expressed through kirtan (devotional singing), transformed religion into an intensely emotional and participatory experience. The relationship between the devotee and God was conceived in deeply personal terms, often modeled on the Radha-Krishna paradigm of divine love, where longing, separation, and union became central spiritual metaphors.

This Vaishnava devotionalism profoundly shaped the cultural and literary environment into which Rabindranath Tagore was born. Tagore's family, particularly through the Brahmo Samaj, was already engaged in reformist spiritual discourse; yet, the emotional intensity and lyrical beauty of Vaishnava Bhakti left a lasting imprint on his poetic imagination.

Bhakti and the Upanishadic Synthesis in Tagore

While the Bhakti movement foregrounded emotional devotion, the philosophical substratum of Indian spirituality lay in the Upanishadic vision of non-duality (Advaita). Tagore's genius lies in his ability to synthesize these two seemingly distinct streams—the emotional fervor of Bhakti and the metaphysical depth of the Upanishads.

In Tagore's poetry, the Divine is both immanent and transcendent. This dual vision reflects the Upanishadic idea of Brahman as the ultimate reality, present within all beings, while also resonating with the Bhakti conception of a personal God who invites love and surrender. Thus, devotion in Tagore is not merely an act of worship but a realization of unity between the individual self and the universal spirit.

This synthesis is evident in *Gitanjali*, where the poet addresses God with the intimacy of a lover or servant, yet simultaneously acknowledges the divine presence in nature, humanity, and the inner self. The Bhakti element is thus elevated into a philosophical and experiential realization, transcending doctrinal boundaries.

Influence of Vaishnava Poetry on Tagore

Tagore's engagement with the Bhakti tradition is also literary. The songs of medieval Vaishnava poets such as Vidyapati and Chandidas, which celebrate the love of Radha and Krishna, provided a rich aesthetic model for his own compositions. These poets transformed devotion into lyrical expression, blending sensual imagery with spiritual longing.

Tagore inherits this tradition but reshapes it in a modern idiom. His early work *Bhanusimha*

Thakurer Padavali (1884), written under a pseudonym, consciously imitates the style of Vaishnava lyrics. The poems evoke the erotic-mystical symbolism of Radha and Krishna, demonstrating Tagore's deep familiarity with Bhakti poetics.

However, in his mature works, Tagore moves beyond imitation to reinterpretation. The Divine Beloved in his poetry is no longer confined to a specific mythological framework but becomes a universal presence, accessible through love, creativity, and moral awakening. Thus, Tagore transforms the Bhakti tradition from a sectarian devotional mode into a universal spiritual language.

Sufi and Universalist Dimensions of Tagore's Bhakti

Another significant dimension of Tagore's Bhakti is its resonance with Sufi mysticism, which similarly emphasizes love as the path to God. The Sufi idea of annihilation of the self (*fana*) finds a parallel in Tagore's notion of surrender, where the ego dissolves in the experience of divine unity.

Tagore's devotional voice, therefore, transcends religious boundaries. His God is not limited to Hindu theology but represents a universal spirit, present in all cultures and traditions. This universalism aligns with the broader ethos of the Bhakti movement, which sought to democratize spirituality and make it accessible to all.

In this context, Tagore's poetry can be seen as a continuation of the Bhakti tradition's inclusive and humanistic spirit, where devotion becomes a means of realizing the interconnectedness of all existence.

The Bhakti tradition provided Rabindranath Tagore with both a spiritual foundation and a poetic framework. Through his engagement with Vaishnava lyricism, Upanishadic philosophy, and Sufi mysticism, Tagore reimagines Bhakti as a dynamic, universal, and deeply personal experience.

His work represents not a mere continuation of tradition but a creative transformation, where devotion is elevated into a form of artistic and philosophical expression that speaks to the modern world. In Tagore, Bhakti becomes not only a religious impulse but a mode of being, characterized by love, humility, and the quest for unity with the infinite.

Devotional Voice and the Language of Surrender

The essence of Bhakti in *Gitanjali* lies in its deeply personal and devotional voice, where the poet assumes the role of a humble seeker addressing the Divine. The poems are structured as prayers, hymns, and intimate dialogues, reflecting the Bhakti ideal of surrender (*prapatti*).

In Poem 1 of *Gitanjali*, Tagore writes: "Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure" (*Gitanjali*, p. 1). This opening declaration encapsulates the Bhakti attitude of complete dependence on divine grace. The human self is portrayed as finite, yet capable of participating in the infinite through divine will. This echoes the devotional humility found in medieval Bhakti saints, where the devotee acknowledges his insignificance before God.

Similarly, in Poem 36, Tagore expresses the longing for inner purification: "This is my prayer to thee, my lord—strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart" (*Gitanjali*, p. 36). The prayer is not for material gain but for the removal of ego and spiritual poverty. Such a sentiment aligns with the Bhakti emphasis on inner transformation rather than external ritual.

The Concept of the Divine Beloved

A central Bhakti motif in *Gitanjali* is the portrayal of God as the Beloved, a theme deeply rooted in Vaishnava and Sufi traditions. Rabindranath Tagore adopts this metaphor to express the soul's yearning for union with the Divine.

In Poem 45, Tagore writes of waiting for the Divine Guest, suggesting a relationship marked by anticipation and (love). The imagery of waiting, longing, and union recalls the Radha-Krishna tradition, where separation (*viraha*) intensifies devotion. However, Tagore universalizes this experience, transforming it into a metaphor for the human condition itself. The Divine Beloved in *Gitanjali* is not confined to a specific form or mythology. Instead, God appears as a presence felt in

silence, nature, and the depths of consciousness. This abstraction allows Tagore to move beyond sectarian Bhakti and articulate a universal spirituality, while still retaining the emotional intensity of devotional love.

Immanence of the Divine in the World

One of the most striking features of Tagore's Bhakti is his insistence on the immanence of God in the everyday world. Unlike ascetic traditions that seek God through renunciation, Tagore finds the Divine in nature, labor, and human relationships.

In Poem 11, he famously declares: "Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! ... He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground" (*Gitanjali*, p. 11). This passage represents a radical reinterpretation of Bhakti, where devotion is not confined to temples or rituals but is realized through engagement with life and service to humanity.

This idea resonates with the teachings of Bhakti saints like Kabir, who rejected ritualism in favor of direct experience of God. Tagore extends this vision by integrating it with a modern humanistic perspective, suggesting that the divine is encountered in the dignity of labor and the unity of human existence.

Music, Song, and the Aesthetic Dimension of Bhakti

The very structure of *Gitanjali* as a collection of songs underscores the aesthetic dimension of Bhakti. Devotion, for Tagore, is inseparable from artistic expression. His poems are not merely theological statements but lyrical offerings, where music and poetry become vehicles of spiritual experience.

Tagore's association with Rabindra Sangeet further highlights this connection. The act of singing becomes a form of devotion, echoing the Bhakti practice of kirtan. In Poem 95, he writes: "I was not aware of the moment when I first crossed the threshold of this life," suggesting the seamless integration of life, music, and spirituality (*Gitanjali*, p. 95). Thus, Bhakti in Tagore is not only a matter of faith but also of aesthetic realization, where beauty becomes a pathway to the Divine.

The Journey from Ego to Self-Realization

Another important Bhakti element in *Gitanjali* is the theme of self-surrender and the dissolution of the ego. Tagore repeatedly emphasizes that union with the Divine requires the relinquishment of pride and individuality.

In Poem 29, he writes of the need to "stand before thee face to face," stripped of all pretensions (*Gitanjali*, p. 29). This mirrors the Bhakti ideal of humility, where the devotee approaches God with complete openness and sincerity.

The journey depicted in *Gitanjali* is thus both spiritual and existential. It involves moving from ignorance to knowledge, from ego to surrender, and from separation to unity. This progression reflects the core principles of Bhakti, while also aligning with the Upanishadic quest for self-realization.

The textual analysis of *Gitanjali* reveals that Bhakti is not merely an influence on Tagore but the very foundation of his poetic vision. Through themes of surrender, divine love, immanence, and self-realization, Tagore reinterprets Bhakti in a modern and universal context.

His poetry transforms devotion into an intimate, aesthetic, and philosophical experience, where the boundaries between the human and the divine dissolve. In this sense, *Gitanjali* stands as one of the most profound expressions of Bhakti in modern literature.

Here is the final section (Section 4) with conclusion and full bibliography, as per your instructions.

Bhakti Transformed into Spiritual Humanism

In Rabindranath Tagore, the Bhakti tradition undergoes a remarkable transformation into what may be termed spiritual humanism. While rooted in the devotional ethos of love, surrender, and divine communion, Tagore expands Bhakti beyond its conventional religious framework into a universal

philosophy of life.

For Tagore, devotion is not confined to acts of worship or theological affirmation; rather, it is realized through service to humanity, love for nature, and the cultivation of inner harmony. This reorientation reflects his conviction that the Divine is immanent in all existence. In *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* (1913), he asserts that “the service of man is the service of God” (p. 98), thereby aligning Bhakti with ethical responsibility and social consciousness.

This universalization of Bhakti finds institutional expression in Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati, where Tagore sought to create an educational environment grounded in spiritual values, artistic creativity, and global fellowship. Here, devotion becomes not merely a personal experience but a collective cultural practice, integrating education, art, and spirituality. Critique of Ritualism and Affirmation of Inner Devotion

A defining feature of Tagore’s reinterpretation of Bhakti is his critique of ritualism and mechanical religiosity. While the traditional Bhakti movement itself challenged ritual orthodoxy, Tagore extends this critique in a modern context, emphasizing the primacy of inner experience over external observance.

This perspective is powerfully articulated in Poem 11 of *Gitanjali*, where he calls upon the devotee to abandon empty rituals and seek God in the labor of the common people. Such a vision democratizes spirituality, making it accessible to all, regardless of social or religious background.

Tagore’s Bhakti is thus characterized by a dynamic inwardness, where devotion becomes a matter of consciousness rather than conformity. The Divine is encountered not in isolation from the world but through active engagement with it. Synthesis of Bhakti, Vedanta, and Global Thought

Tagore’s spiritual vision is not limited to Indian traditions alone. While deeply rooted in Bhakti and Vedanta, it also engages with Western humanism and global philosophical currents. This synthesis enables Tagore to articulate a form of devotion that is both culturally specific and universally resonant.

Scholars such as K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar have noted that Tagore’s work represents “a fusion of the devotional and the philosophical, the emotional and the intellectual” (*Indian Writing in English*, p. 73). Similarly, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya observes that Tagore’s spirituality transcends sectarian boundaries, embodying a global humanistic ideal.

In this synthesis, Bhakti becomes a bridge between cultures, offering a language of love and unity that speaks to the modern world. Tagore’s poetry thus participates in a broader dialogue between East and West, tradition and modernity, faith and reason.

Tagore as a Modern Bhakti Poet

It is in this expanded sense that Rabindranath Tagore may be regarded as a modern Bhakti poet. Unlike the medieval saints, whose devotion was often expressed within specific religious frameworks, Tagore articulates a form of Bhakti that is inclusive, reflective, and universal.

His poetry retains the essential features of Bhakti—love, surrender, longing, and communion—while reinterpreting them in the light of modern consciousness. The Divine Beloved becomes a symbol of universal unity, and devotion becomes a path toward self-realization and social harmony.

In this sense, Tagore does not merely inherit the Bhakti tradition; he recreates it, adapting its insights to the needs of a changing world.

Conclusion

The present study has demonstrated that the works of Rabindranath Tagore are deeply imbued with the spirit of Bhakti, which he reinterprets in a profoundly original manner. Beginning with the devotional ethos of the Vaishnava tradition and enriched by the philosophical depth of the Upanishads, Tagore develops a vision of Bhakti that is at once personal and universal, emotional and intellectual, traditional and modern.

Through a close analysis of *Gitanjali*, this article has shown that Tagore’s poetry embodies key Bhakti elements such as surrender, divine love, immanence, and self-realization. However, these

elements are transformed into a broader framework of spiritual humanism, where devotion becomes a means of realizing the unity of all existence.

Tagore's significance lies in his ability to bridge the gap between the medieval and the modern, the religious and the secular, the individual and the universal. His Bhakti is not confined to any single tradition but emerges as a universal mode of spiritual experience, capable of addressing the existential concerns of humanity.

In an age marked by fragmentation and conflict, Tagore's vision of Bhakti as love, harmony, and unity remains profoundly relevant. His poetry continues to inspire readers across cultures, affirming the timeless truth that the path to the Divine lies in the heart's capacity for love and the soul's longing for unity with the infinite.

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