

Humanism in the Selected Poems of Rabindranath Tagore and G. Sankara Kurup – A Critical Comparison

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Indian Poets from Different Regions



G. Sankara Kurup (1901-1978)
Courtesy: keralasahityaakademi.org

Rabindranath Tagore and G. Sankara Kurup are two Indian poets belonging to two different states and cultures, sharing common views on many sociological issues. Though they did not see eye to eye on all issues, both have a humanistic yearning to settle burning issues concerning the suppressed and working classes caught in the clutches of their masters. They are ready to champion the cause of the down-trodden women. It is amazing to note that both these romantic poets of the Indian Renaissance had a message to convey.

Tagore, the Nobel Laureate, reached out to readers across the world and W. B. Yeats got a new awakening through his reading of the Gitanjali.



Rabindranath Tagore 1861-1941

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabindranath_Tagore

G. Sankara Kurup from Malayalam Literature was the first poet to be honoured with the Gnanapeeth award. Both of them are humanists. A comparative study of the poets from a humanistic angle will be rewarding and profitable.

Man is the Measure of Everything

For humanists, man is the measure of everything. Karl Barth a 20th century Swiss Theologian affirms that there is no humanism without the Gospel. Christianity has indeed contributed a lot to the growth of humanism. Comte, the 19th century positivist includes all social reforms under humanism, suggesting humanism need not have anything to do with religion. With the technological revolution in the 20th century, science and technology have been tailored to the needs of man. Today pragmatists, existentialists and Marxists eulogise humanism.

Though humanism was not new in India, the Western mode of humanism influenced Indian humanism. Indian humanism had been rooted in the Upanishadic, Vaishnavite and the Buddhist traditions. Western humanism contributed something new, namely “the secular emphasis of humanism, its detachment from religion and unconcern with spiritual values as such” 1.

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According to Indian tradition, nature and man are considered to be the expression of the same Brahman. Tagore was born into the golden age of Bengali literary and cultural renaissance. He became the great spokesman of the epoch.

As in the case of Tagore, G. Sankara Kurup was born into the humanistic tradition of the Malayalam Literature. The literary figures in Malayalam Literature reacted and responded to the contemporary social problems of the age. Vallathol was a nationalistic poet, Kumaran Asan fought for social justice and G. Sankara Kurup had a deep concern for the poor and the oppressed classes.

Man is the Centre in Tagore's Humanism

Man is at the centre of Tagore's humanism. While the Western humanists concentrate on the materialistic welfare of man, Indian humanists focus on the spiritual and the ethical nature of man. Man is given the highest rank, because of the divine spirit in him. Spiritualism brings him closer to humanity. Tagore is a missionary of the 20th century with total commitment to serve his fellowmen. Service to mankind, according to Tagore is the best means of realizing God. This could be done through the paths of Knowledge, Love and Service (Gnana Marga, Bakthi Marga and Karma Marga) "To serve and not to be served" is Tagore's watch word. In Geetanjali poem no: 10, the poet's readiness to work for the down-trodden is evident.

Here is thy foot stool and there rest
Thy feet where live the poorest and lowliest
And lost 2

Tagore calls upon the devotees to come out of their dark chambers to meet the common man.

Come out of thy meditations and leave
Aside thy flowers and incense 3

(God) He is there where the tiller is tilling

The hard ground and where the path maker is breaking the stones
He is with them in Sun and shower and garment is covered with dust 4

Sankara Kurup and Religion

G. Sankara Kurup hated the religion which won't wipe away the tears of the widows or feed the starving millions. His poem *Oru Kasu, Oru Kasu (A Penny, A Penny)* depicts a temple crowded with devotees and a haggard boy begging for a penny. Not a single devotee responded to the request. The temple treasuries are hoarded with offerings and nobody had the compassion to give a penny to the starving boy. Yet another lyric *Kochamma (the Aristocratic lady)* delineates a well clad woman feeding her pet cat from a silver dish and turning away a poor beggar saying

Get your black ugly face out of here,
Lest your evil eye should cause harm to my pet 5

Tagore's Inherited Material Wealth and His World View

The Tagore family owned large estates spread over East Bengal and Orissa and he had chances to be acquainted with the labourers. Tagore's poem "Half Acre of Land" narrates the sad story of a man who was compelled to dispose of all his property, except a half acre, which also was usurped from him.

"Don't take away my only plot
It's more than gold – for seven generations my family
Has owned it; must I sell my mother through poverty" 6

Tagore brings out the drawbacks of the zamindari system.

Sankara Kurup on Bonded Labour

G. Sankara Kurup also has portrayed the merciless attitude of the zamindars who exploit the Pulyas who work for them. Kali the bond labourer was determined that she would not have a baby, if the baby were to work like a slave for the same master. In the poem

Mavinte Margam, Kurup brings before our mind's eye a wood cutter going in search of work leaving his sick wife and he returns to find her dead; and again he goes in search of wood for the funeral pyre.

In Search of Redemption for the Working Class

Both Tagore and Kurup hope that the working class would one day find redemption. Tagore hopes that it would be through man's encounter with God. Kurup is more down to earth and expects this to happen only through revolution. His poem *Na:le (Tomorrow)* is the picture of the bright tomorrow, when the workers are at last redeemed from the hands of capitalists. The cry of liberty, equality and fraternity is heard throughout the poem. Kurup tells the aristocrats to give up their insolent attitude. The peasantry goes half naked, but they have clothed the nation with green fields. Kurup seems to have Marxist leanings and the poem reflects the doctrine of class struggle by the communists.

Heaven born star, Haughty in your lofty state
Think you earned by merit what comes by birth for you to get agitated to turn
Tremble, beware, mighty blazing tomorrow arrives⁷

Tagore, Sankara Kurup and Communism

Tagore visited Russia under the communist government, he was ashamed of being a land owner himself, though the family followed the tenets of human dignity in caring for the laborers. He was moved by the incredible courage of the Russians in raising a new socialistic world, though the story of Russia today is totally different.

Kurup is all in admiration of the sweeper who sets to work before dawn and he tells the rich women to have respect for such workers. He reminds us that our life style needs to be cleansed, our superstitious practices and meaningless rituals need to be thrown off and we need to care for the poor. Thus the poem *Tu:ppuka:ri (The Sweeper)* shows Kurup's concern for such workers. Kurup's labourer with the spade on his shoulder is a mythical character,

who is ready to fight with the spade till he achieves social equality. In *Kunukal (Mushrooms)* Kurup gives a clarion call for the total destruction of the feudal system. 'Mushrooms' symbolize the feudal Lords in pre-independent India. The message of the plough is

I will plough the earth, level it
Make it beautiful 8

It connotes the forthcoming revolutionary changes which will fulfill the dreams of the down-trodden workers.

Status of Women: Tagore and Sankara Kurup

Both these poets were concerned about the status of women in society.

Tagore always considers women as social agents to transform society. The women in his poems challenge the male dominated society. "Woman is imaged as a human being in the process of full humanization and man finds in this image the creative principle of growth" 9. According to Tagore, the human world is also the woman's world. He had in mind the sufferings of the young brides in the joint families of Bengal. Tagore never wanted women to waste their talents, time and energy in the endless tedium of cooking and washing. Woman should extend their radiance beyond the boundaries of the family. He had a great concern for the women employed in cheap labour.

Kurup also highlights the social injustices done to women. The poems *The Throbbing Pyre*, *Inakkuruvikal (weaver birds)* and *Mu:nnu Aruviyum, Oru Pulayum (Three Sreams and a River)* deal with the sufferings of women in some way or the other. The poem *Andhyama:lyam (Last Homage)* is a glorious tribute to a women who became a victim of the political crisis in Kerala during the Vimochana Samaram (Liberation Movement). Flory, the pregnant women was killed in the shooting ordered by the police to drive away the rebels. G. Sankara Kurup reacted to this incident with his sharp pen in the poem *Andhyama:lyam*.

Oh you are dead before you were born into this Earth
By the cruelest sin of this country¹⁰

Mind without Fear

Tagore's famous lyric

Where the mind is without fear
And the head is held high
And where knowledge is free.
Where the world has not been broken up into
Fragments by narrow domestic walls.

suggests that free India should provide intellectual freedom to launch constructive activities. He hopes that his country will awake, discuss and plan for the future. This is moral and spiritual emancipation. In the words of a critic, the above poem which is in the form of a prayer, a plea, a hope carries within it Tagore's deepest humanistic impulses. The ideal person projected in the poem is the one that carries within himself or herself the humanism that Tagore longed for. One can find in the poem the blending of the East and the West, which is an integral part of Tagore's poetic humanism.

Tagore on Indian Educational System

The humanist in Tagore was unhappy with the Indian educational system, a slavish imitation of the West. As an antidote, he visualized an ideal educational system free from commercialization of education which is so prevalent today. His Shanthi Niketan was an ashram of cultural and spiritual realization. The great Indian film maker Sathyajith Ray proclaims that his experiences at Shanthi Niketan transformed his life. Tagore thought that the best citizens of the country could be turned out of the portals of Vishvabarathi an Eastern university providing immense opportunities to learn languages, fine arts, culture and religion. He meant it to be an international centre of culture. Tagore knew that India has a great role to play in shaping the future of the world and the East has moral wealth to provide to the West.

Education and Freedom for Sankara Kurup

Kurup also believed that freedom is the birth right of man. The humanism of the poet transcends national limits. Kurup reveals his protest on the fascist attack on Abyssinia. He could express the sympathies with the people of Africa and Japan.

To Conclude

Thus, the Bengali bard Tagore and the Malayalee lark Kurup are lyricists with a rare humanistic approach. Both glorify the potentials of man, and depict the exploitation of the poor, the powerful nation's atrocities on the weaker ones, the painful experiences of women. Both stand for equality, fraternity and liberty. Kurup would even advocate the employment of a little violence to reach the goal. He was concerned about the social welfare of man and Tagore would go a step further to help him achieve spiritual liberation as well. Tagore is acknowledged as a spiritual humanist and Kurup a social humanist.

Notes

1. Krishna, Kirubalini **Modern Indian Literature** (Bombay: Nirmala Sathanantha Publishers 1968), p. 76.
2. Rabindranath Tagore, **Gitanjali** (New York: Mac Milan and Co Ltd., 1962), p. 8.
3. Ibid, p. 9.
4. Ibid.
5. G. Sankara Kurup, **Otakuzhal** (Kottayam: S. P. C. S. Ltd., 1967), p. 45.
6. William Radice, trans; Rabindranath Tagore: **Selected Poems** (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 55.
7. Gi:yute Terenjedu the Kavitalakal, (Kottayam: SPCS, 1974), p. 135.
8. Ibid, p. 147.
9. W. Cenker "The Feminine in the Works of Rabindranath Tagore" **Rabindranath Tagore: American Interpretations**, ed., Irag Zepp, Jr. (Calcutta: Writer's Work Shop 1991), p. 109.

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10. G. Sankara Kurup, **Vishva Dharsanam** (Kottayam: S. P. C. S. Ltd., 1988), p.81.

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