



Can Nāstikas Taste Āstika Poetry? Tagore's Poetry and the Critique of Secularity

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Abstract

This paper asks the following question: can an atheist reader fully taste the aesthetic meaning of poetry written by a theist author? This question is discussed with specific reference to the devotional poetry of Tagore. The paper discusses forms of pre-modern religious thinking which influenced Tagore's conceptions of God, his relation to Nature, human society, and the human self. But it stresses that Tagore's time was different from those of pre-modern believers. Tagore, as a modern thinker, had to fashion a response to the 'problem' of disenchantment. He constructed a philosophic vision that embraced modern science, but argued that it did not dispel the sense of living in an enchanted universe. Consequently, it is argued that a *nāstika* can enjoy his poetry. This requires the *nāstika* to view the idea of God not as a failure of cognition, but as a triumph of the imagination. I can continue to enjoy Tagore's poetry without unease.

This paper will try to think through a problem that is both personal and general. I admire Tagore's musical and poetic art and consider some devotional songs to be its best achievements. Is this a defensible and uncontradictory position? Clearly, this is also a much wider general historical problem. The general problem is: can a *nāstika* admire *āstika* art — irrespective of the historical period?¹ If we live in a 'secular age' — in which there is something disreputable about believing in God — to many

¹ I must make it clear that my use of the two terms *āstika* and *nāstika* is taken from the modern Bengali use in which *nāstika* is a translation-term for the English word atheist. These two terms are, of course, of ancient provenance in Indian philosophy. In pre-modern philosophy, *āstika* means those who believe in the authority of the Vedas, and *nāstika* those who do not (See Editorial Introduction to this issue on discussion of the distinctions and permutations.) Philosophic traditions like the Cārvākas or the Buddhists would fall under that technical description. My use here does not either refer to or draw from that pre-modern tradition of debate. I simply mean that Tagore's philosophical position should be characterized as *āstika*, because he is convinced of God's existence, and my position is skeptical — answering the modern description of a *nāstika* (See Editorial Introduction to this special issue on distinctions and permutations.)

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secular spirits, it is a sign of backwardness, does that accentuate the problem for secular people like me?²

What is interesting here is the fact that the *nāstika* position is a negation rather than a free-standing one, somewhat like *ahiṃsā* (non-violence). And a lot depends on to *what kind of God the atheist denies existence*. This paper will serially examine several forms of argumentation that a *nāstika* can present to defend his enjoyment — without inconsistency — of *āstika* art. For the *āstika* artist, his art depends entirely on the conviction that God exists, and He has a particular nature. Can we really enjoy artistic writing while considering the fundamental belief on which it is constructed erroneous?

God, it is rumored, created the world in verse. This thought is hard to understand, given the state of our world. It seems that, even if he had, his human creatures found a way of escaping the ethical restraints he put on them by making them in his own image and, using his fatal error of conferring free will on them, found their own way to degrade it beyond recognition. Little trace of that original verse seems to be left. But the idea of creation as versification is unmistakably available in major religions, and major modern thinkers have sought to think through that idea in their own reflections on the world of advancing modernity. This idea can be found in nearly identical phrasing in many different religious traditions. Ancient Kashmiri theorists of the *pratyabhijñā* school thought of Śiva, the creator of the world, as a poet, and his creation as inextricably linked to poetry. Ibn Arabi said directly, God created the world in verse.³ Medieval Vaiṣṇava extended this idea by asserting that, if we cultivate our listening, we can hear Kṛṣṇa's flute sounding in the universe. Rabindranath Tagore, the main object of reading in this paper, drew deliberately from these earlier traditions and developed them to produce a coping strategy with the discontents of modernity.

The argument I shall offer is simple, but can be elucidated by using the verse metaphor. If we were thinking about a poet, not God, and the artifact was not the whole of creation, but a poem — let us say an infinitely long poem — we can split this 'poetic quality' into three component elements. The first is an empirical question: is this poem a creation of Kālidāsa or Amaru — regarding the empirical question of authorship. A second question can be about whether this text is indeed in what we generally acknowledge as verse, for instance, in the meter *mandākrāntā*.⁴ Critics can then engage in the further question of aesthetic judgment: is this verse of excellent quality or mediocre? To return to thinking about the world, my argument will be that on the first question — whether it is created by God or not — the vast gap between the *nāstika* and *āstika* positions is unlikely to be reduced. But that is not entirely

² I owe another point of clarification here. I do not think it is obligatory for irreligious people to necessarily believe in the rationalist thesis of disenchantment. German scholars point out that the term 'disenchantment' — though conventionalized through Weber's use — has come to carry a much wider meaning in the Anglo-American literature.

³ 'God Almighty made existence like a verse of poetry in its structure and its order... All of the world is endowed with rhythm, fastened by rhyme, on the Straight Path.'

Denis E. McAuley, *Ibn 'Arabi's Mystical Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 44–45.

In the Arabic: Muḥyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-makkiyah*, ed. Aḥmad Shamsaddīn, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2006), 414. I thank Mohamed Wajdi Ben Hammed for this quote.

⁴ A meter used by Kalidasa in his *Meghaduta* and widely used in Sanskrit verse-making.

determinant of our judgment about the second and the third questions — on both of which a *nāstika* reader can, without being inconsistent to his ontological commitments, allow himself to be persuaded by the *āstika* artist. Without believing that the world is created by God, a *nāstika* can think it has a discernible arrangement that can be regarded as 'poetic' and that it offers us sufficient material to use imaginatively against the usual disappointments and afflictions of ordinary human life. The world has, as the Kashmiri thinkers say, an artistic character: and using our imagination (*kalpanā*), we can do with the real world what we know we can do with works of art. So, a *nāstika* can establish the similarity between the world and art — not by the thinking that God has created the world like art-objects, but that human beings can use the world the way they use art-objects. There can be a large degree of overlap between these two *āstika* and *nāstika* conceptions of the world — without obliterating their profound distinction on the first question. I conclude that I can, without feeling logical guilt, enjoy Tagore's poetry — even on the theme of *pūjā* (worship).⁵

I shall present first the setting of Tagore's poetic art, followed by a genealogy of his aesthetic thought, and finally, what I take to be the structure of his thinking about the crucial relations between God, nature, human beings, and the self. After presenting more fully what he has to say about each of these subjects, I shall show why it is possible for a *nāstika* reader to assent to a large part of these statements and the unanxious enjoyment of this world-picture in words, in addition, to feel particular gratitude to him, because I doubt if someone else — without his religious ontological commitments — could convey these ideas with such refinement and clarity. I derive a double advantage from this process. I get a richer picture of the world to live with than my own ontological commitments can deliver; and at the same time, I do not have to assent to an idea to which I am not unprepared to make a commitment.

Reading Historically: Setting the Historical Context Correctly

The opposition between theist and atheist philosophic positions is very old and exists in both pre-modern and modern historical periods, but the position of atheism is very different in these two cultural milieux. My concern is with ideas of a *modern* theist poet. So this entire discussion is about whether a modern *nāstika* can enjoy modern *āstika* poetry. The modernity of the context is highly significant, because we generally accept the idea that the advent of modernity alters the relation between theism and atheism radically. According to standard sociological theory, in modernity, atheism or secularism⁶ becomes the default position of culture. Belief and unbelief exchange places. While in pre-modern cultures unbelief had to give special reasons for its existence, now the default position is not to take the existence of God

⁵ Tagore divided his songs into four/five cycles — *pūjā* (worship), *prem* (love), *prakṛti* (nature), *svadeś* (native land), and *vicitra* (assorted/many-colored). For him, *pūjā* is the first. Rabindranath Tagore, *Gītāvitān*.

⁶ In fact, this equation is misleading. Atheism is a philosophic position; secularization is a process of transformation of whole societies. In another sense, secularism is a state principle.

for granted.⁷(Taylor, 2007) But the temporal question in our discussion is somewhat more complicated. Our poet, Rabindranath Tagore, in my reading, absorbs into his artistic conception of the world some influential pre-modern notions on God, nature, and human beings. Is there a difference between the West or Latin Christendom and the Indian cultural world about the ‘age’ in which we live? Does it make sense to say that, if we live in the West, we would be in an indubitably secular age; but in India, we do not? Is the ‘age’ itself different in different parts of the world? Can we say there is no sufficiently singular historical world, so that we can confidently assert a singular characterization of time? Is time itself spatially fragmented, and we live in its separate incommensurable corners?⁸

The Context of Secularity: Our Context

Neither the writers of the Upaniṣads, nor the Pratyabhijñā philosophers, nor the Vaiṣṇava theologians and poets had to contend with a culture which assumes the non-existence of God. As they wrote in a world where God’s presence was an accepted background assumption, debates were only about his qualities. Philosophers did not have to inaugurate their thinking with a critique of secularity. But should we take for granted this way of positing the historical context? Taylor’s work is stimulating precisely because on one fundamental point he rejects the standard Weberian narrative of secularization. First Taylor offers a careful, detailed chronological account of the process of intellectual secularization, driven by the emergence of the modern scientific revolution. Development of science systematically divests natural processes of mysteries, of unintelligible complexity. Techniques of science do not reduce the rational registration of complexity of the natural universe but slowly craft analytical methods of sufficient answering complexity to make the universe intelligible. At the end of this long intellectual development, Taylor places the doctrines of Providential Deism that not merely accept the picture of the universe shaped by modern science but, more profoundly, admit that it is the province of scientific thinking to unravel these complexities in nature’s existence. Deism retains its deep belief that this design is fashioned by God — an appropriate creator of the homo faber — who established these qualities and rules and made them function eternally without further help from him. God exists as the artificer of this universe — but in hiding. On Taylor’s account of this intellectual history, both proto-secularists and religious thinkers concur in this view — that, to function, the universe or nature does not require a constantly attendant engineer. But the two sides then draw totally divergent conclusions. For some the absence of a constant minder of the universe makes the need and the presence of this artificer fade, resulting in disbelief. Secular people do not need a God as a source of either the natural universe or, after Kant, of ethical rules. They can now not merely believe in a Godless, totally secularized universe, but, as they have to give an account to themselves of the known

⁷ Charles Taylor defines ‘a secular age’ by that feature.

⁸ This leads to a very important question about historical thinking: is historical time one or many? But we cannot pursue this problem here.

history of religion, they can see the rise of their own form of thinking as a narrative of 'subtraction' — 'rise' of the human mind to higher levels in which unnecessary and erroneous beliefs are rescinded (Taylor, Chapters 6, 7, 15). Another line of thinking out of this intellectual conjuncture regarded the evidence of a constantly expanding complexity of the natural universe as the signal of God's omnipotence. Omnipotence is now reconceived — not seen as caprice taken to an infinite degree, but as the power that must be required to create such an infinite system. The most startling suggestion in Taylor's analysis is that it is entirely possible for rational individuals to accept the scientific picture of the world — what he calls the 'immanent frame' — and still continue to believe in God (Taylor, Chapter 15). Empirical evidence would support Taylor's view that despite sociological secularization many in the Western world would believe both in the immanent frame and in God's existence in some form. Taylor's analysis can be read to produce a paradox: that we undoubtedly live in 'a secular world,' but in this world, unlike what Weber assumed, the radically secular are in a minority. If this is a plausible reading of Taylor's analysis, further questions naturally arise — how can the ideas of a minority dominate the culture of the majority?

Reading Taylor's work in this way obliges us to think more closely about the chronotopic variations in the idea of 'a secular age.'⁹ Do all human beings who are inhabitants of this *time* — partakers of this age? Or is this 'age' topically heterogeneous? This is a question that has been sharpened by very recent discussions about decolonial thinking in history.¹⁰ But this is a necessary discussion regarding the historicity of thinking. Did Tagore live and respond to 'a secular age'; and if he did not, do we? This is a crucial analysis because this will determine how we accurately understand Tagore's theoretical context, his *pūrvapakṣas*. All modern Indian thinkers had to contend with two types of *pūrvapakṣas* — pre-modern Indian and modern Western thought — to both of which Tagore responded with an attitude of discerning disagreement.

Tagore's Context

What was Tagore's context like? In late nineteenth century Bengal, he certainly did not face a general intellectual consensus in favor of 'the immanent frame.' In fact, he was one of the few who embraced this novel idea. But he certainly lived inside a culture marked by genuine anxiety arising from the possibility that the new scientific-atheist view will sweep everything before it. Probably, his contemporaries exaggerated the power of Western secular thought and feared an imminent extinction of their religious world of inhabitation. At the same time, Tagore, whose primary thinking language was Bengali, worked inside a language almost entirely untouched by a deep, taken-for-granted, secularity. On the contrary, every secular

⁹ Taylor leaves this question open and insists that his history is a narrative of intellectual changes in Latin Christendom.

¹⁰ See Nigam's discussion about Ernst Bloch, Aditya Nigam, 2020.

idea had to be inserted into the Bengali words selected to convey them through a semantic struggle: a pre-modern meaningfulness had to be deliberately erased and the term invested with a new modern semantic denotative content.¹¹

Thus Tagore was situated strategically at a critical historical moment. Though Tagore (1861–1941) and Weber (1864–1920) were almost exact contemporaries, their historical worlds were not commensurable.¹² Simply saying that this reveals the ‘synchronicity of the asynchronous’ is true but trivial: it simply asserts that what is isotemporal is not isomorphic. In 1922, when Weber is writing the two essays on Protestant Ethic — taking for his object of analysis the ‘already-happened’ historical process of the rise of capitalist modernity — Tagore is living in a surrounding sea of religiosity. There is also an immense distance between two natural languages inside which the two do their thinking. Weber is thinking through and trying to stretch the semantic and analytical capacities of a new historicist language of secularized social science in German. Tagore’s linguistic inhabitation is inside Bengali which had gone through little semantic secularization. It is important to remember that a ‘picture of the world’ is already implicit in each language. We can then turn to the question: what attitude should atheistic readers today adopt towards Tagore’s poetic ontology?

Constituents of Tagore’s Poetic World

Tagore’s poetic world is composed of four components: God, nature, the human being, and his¹³ individual and interior self.¹⁴ All these elements are held together in a world that is illimitable yet intimate — an infinite structure of the greatest intricacy and refinement. I think Tagore constructed each of these elements using a language from the deep past¹⁵; but at the same time, that language had already learnt, in his mind, to contend with the unaccustomed difficulties generated by a looming modernity threatening to colonize this world. To Tagore, the language of the past came from three different religious sources: the Upaniṣads from Vedic antiquity, Kashmiri Saivism from the tenth century, but above all from Vaiṣṇava theology and

¹¹ I have tried to show this in case of a most mundane but essential word: freedom — how the older meaning of the term *mukti* was initially overwritten with the new precisely secular meaning of a politically inflected freedom and how, after social change worked in its favor, the word came to bear the second meaning with stability, and the former meaning forgotten. Sudipta Kaviraj, ‘The ideas of freedom in India,’ in Robert Taylor (ed), *The Idea of Freedom in Asia and Africa*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.

¹² I explore this contrast between Weber and Tagore in greater detail in terms of sociological theory in a forthcoming paper, ‘Is disenchantment inevitable?’, University of Leipzig. Also in a Bengali essay, Kaviraj 2021

¹³ In both sense of this term: the poet’s own, and of the abstract human being evoked by the first person pronoun — *ami*. Some aspects of this pronoun are examined in my ‘The poetry of interiority,’ in Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Invention of Private Life*, Chapter, Columbia University Press, 2014.

¹⁴ Use of the term self or I/me in poetic enunciation is a fascinating problem which cannot be analyzed here. How something as non-transferable as the self can be used generally is an interesting question.

¹⁵ The idea of the self in his work is clearly suffused with associations from the Upaniṣads reflected in typical phrases like ‘*e āmir ābaran*’ (the cover of this self) noticed by Sankha Ghosh, *E Āmir Ābaran*, Papyrus, Kolkata, 1991.

poetics of the sixteenth century — which was already a part of Tagore's own immediate literary culture. I shall specify what I think Tagore drew from each corpus.

Upaniṣadic Wonder

Tagore came from a family of Brahmo reformers, intensely active in reconstituting Hindu religiosity. Absorbing rationalist philosophic thinking, and witnessing Protestant religiosity, early Brahmos accepted a form of Providential Deism.¹⁶ But, as they did not intend to convert to Christianity, they faced a problem of selecting elements from the vast Hindu corpus of religious texts which gave expression to their Deist conception of God. Human Being's appropriate comportment to this God, who is both hidden and revealed, is philosophic wonder. Paradoxically, the best communicative vehicle for this emotion was not the cognitive language of philosophy, but the artistic language of poetry. These background beliefs in the nature of God, and his presence in the universe made them seek appropriate liturgical expression mainly from the Upaniṣads, and a few Vedic sūktas which they edited to their taste. Tagore's writings — both his musical poetry and his philosophic prose — are full of direct references to the Upaniṣadic hymns. The Upaniṣads contained many other strands — of ritualistic instructions, religious lore, examination of forms of religious knowledge, instructions on intellectual practice; but Brahmos selected only hymns expressing philosophic wonder at the universe and seeking knowledge of God, this 'being the color of the sun, beyond darkness'.¹⁷ That, the Upaniṣads said, 'is the only way by which humans can go beyond death: there is no other way.'¹⁸ We must be clear on one particular point in this reading. God's creation is celebrated by a seer who is primarily a seeker of *knowledge*. The wonder at the unknown, mysterious universe is praised in a language that is poetic. Strictly speaking, the Upaniṣads do not characterize God as a poet.

Reading the Poetry of the World: Kashmiri Saivism

One intriguing feature of understanding Tagore's 'language' is the frequency of the idea that God is a poet, that he created the universe in a rhythm/meter (*chanda*), yet the absence of direct references to the great religious tradition which made this idea central to its theological reflections — '*pratyabhijñā*' (self-recognition) philosophy of Kashmiri Saivism. Arising in the eighth century, partly in response to Buddhist critiques of Vedic doctrine, Kashmiri thought fashioned an entirely new form of philosophic reflection which was imbricated with a philosophical aesthetics of amazing subtlety and complexity. The theory of artistic pleasure (*rasa* theory)

¹⁶ Christian missionaries active in nineteenth century Bengal were mainly Protestants, and education curricula exposed them to British protestant theology.

¹⁷ '*Ādityavarṇam tamasāḥ parastāt*'. This particular chant: '*śṛṇvantu visve amṛtasya putrāḥ...*' was also used by Vivekananda for his reading of Hinduism.

¹⁸ *Śvetaśvatara Upaniṣad*, Chapter 2, verse 5. 'atī mṛtyum eti, nānyāḥ panthā vidyate ayanāya'.

that Kashmiri philosophers constructed in the tenth century has remained the central corpus of Indian aesthetic reflection and practice ever after.¹⁹

Major philosophers of this tradition often invoke Siva in their invocation verses as a poetic creator of the universe: directly viewing creation as poetry. Despite their extraordinary achievements in aesthetic philosophical analysis, their eventual conclusion regarding religious life remained other-worldly: ordinary human life was incapable of transcendence. Moments of savoring great art — in an actual theater where people watch drama or in the mind's inner theater where the savoring of poetry occurs — constitute the only possibility of transcendence. The transiently overwhelming and transporting taste of art²⁰ was, for them, equal to the taste of God²¹ (Viśvanātha, 1923) — but necessarily temporary. A whole human life cannot be passed inside a theater. Untheatrical, unartistic mundane life remained unsatisfactory — worthy of *vairagya*, non-attachment. The highest task of religious cultivation through a process they called *pratyabhijñā* (recognition of God in oneself) was to renounce this world and achieve unity or merger with God — which left human life as ultimately incapable of rising from degradation.

Listening to the Music of the World: Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism

Vaiṣṇava thinkers in the sixteenth century worked a fundamental transformation of this ideal of religious life. Paradoxically, the new theorists of Vaisnavism totally absorbed the complex theoretical apparatus of Kashmiri aesthetics into their own doctrines, but put it to a complete new theoretical purpose. Nearly all Kashmiri technical concepts regarding *rasa* are re-used in the elaboration of Vaiṣṇava doctrines of *prema**bhakti*, but under the sign of a total determinative re-theorization. Each singular concept is present, but doing some entirely different philosophical work.²² For example, the *rasa* theorists elaborated a doctrine of nine fundamental mental states of human subjects which come into play in the process of aesthetic rapture (*rasanīṣpatti*). To eight states mentioned in the original text — the *Nāṭyaśāstra* — the erotic, comic, compassionate, enthusiastic, heroic, wonderment, revulsion, and terror, the Kashmiri commentators famously added the tranquil (*śānta*). In Kashmiri aesthetics, these are applied as categories defining diegetic moments or dramatic personae. All these categories are now subsumed under the axial category of *bhakti* (emotive devotion to God). But the main conceptual-philosophic transformation Bhakti doctrines introduced is the idea that if we believe that transcendence of ordinary human life — which is a life of irreparable degradation and unfulfillment — can occur only inside the experience of great art, eventually, very little of an ordinary life span is transformed. Human existence is conceived as irredeemably

¹⁹ For excellent accounts of the relevant parts of their thinking, McCrea, 2008, Reich, 2021, Chakrabarti, 2000a.

²⁰ Which turns subjects into *vedyāntarasparśasūnya* — untouched by other perceptions. Viśvanātha, 20.

²¹ *brahmasvādasahodara* — sibling to the taste of God. Ibid.

²² This is particularly evident in the philosophic arrangement or architecture of a text like the Ujjavalanīlamanī. All the nine rasas are deployed, along with the technical terminology of *vibhāva*, *anubhāva*, *vyabhicārī* bhava, the distinction between *rasa*, *rasabhāsa*.

degraded; and for fulfillment, human beings have to wait for death and subsequent merger into God's own beatific existence. Bhakti theologians present two distinct objections to this theory of transcendence. First, this quarantines ultimate joy only inside the experience of art. Second, even the picture of beatitude is not particularly attractive: it an endless expanse of eventless serenity. Vaiṣṇava theorists propose daring emendations to both these ideas. They propose taking the experience of art from inside the theater and the reading of texts into a more mundane, more repetitive, more everyday scene of religious worship — where intense religious emotion is given wings by poetry and music. But the more significant and startling suggestion is that the object of Vaisnava religious life should not be viewed as eventual ascent to *vaikuṅṭha* and equality with God's existence, which must be other-worldly. The task of human life is inhabitation in Vṛndāvana — a half-real, half-imagined space *in this world* — in which, with imaginative, ethical and artistic cultivation (*sādhana*) human beings can actually live. And this transcendence of ordinariness is open not only to the *sādhakas* or religious adepts, but to all human beings. In a deep and highly interesting sense, it is the opposite of askesis. Vaisnavas should desire — not a quick end to human life, but an endless extension of the life in Vṛndāvana. This Vṛndāvana (Vṛindāvana), when seen correctly, is real — because it is this human existence, but imagined because it is untainted by suffering. Further, it is imagined not in the sense that it does not exist; rather, we persuade us to believe that it does — that is, a fantasy. It is imagined in the sense that although it does not exist immediately, this can be conceived, worked for as a potential state of being. If our aesthetic capacities and our ethical self-fashioning can be properly coordinated and directed attentively towards these ends, that state of affairs can be realized, made real — objectified. Ironically, followers of Indian philosophers and Marx should not find it hard to understand this process. Initially a potter has only a conception of an object that is non-existent. If he has access to earth and water to make pliable clay, and the laboring skill to fashion a pot, this entirely non-existent 'non-thing' will be thingified — turned by labor into a thing — objectified. Vaiṣṇava doctrine was thus centered on a simple, elemental, and utterly transformational message regarding the nature of religious experience. The task of God — the reason for God's existence — was to show us, fallen creatures, who were fallen not because of innate sinfulness, but because we did not recognize the paradise within our grasp, how to lead a human life and aim, failingly, at perfection. No other religious group had the daring to humanize divinity — God himself — so radically. Clearly, this vision was nothing short of revolutionary. With their uncanny intelligence, ordinary people were quick to grasp the newness of this message and responded through a real explosion of artistic creativity. *Kṛṣṇabhakti* in the ordinary form — not in its arcane theological intricacy — occupied the imaginative language of India. It won't be an exaggeration to claim that we have still not invented any other language for the expression of our innermost emotions.²³

²³ I think the *language* of expression of love in the vastly popular Hindi films of the 1950s and 1960s speaks this language — almost exclusively.

Kṛṣṇa was the first God to summon the courage to show that the real tasks of godliness were not winning terrifying battles or giving subtle counsel to kings or ruling with imperturbable calm and justice, but to accomplish far more urgent human tasks — being a charming toddler to his mother, an incomparable lover to his sweetheart, an entirely dependable friend to his companions, and charming the world with the music of his flute. God, in this profound transformation in the Indian religious world, was moving in the exact opposite direction from Western Deism. In the West, God was becoming more omnipotent, abstract and hidden; in India, He was becoming more concrete, human, and manifest. In the Western transformation, God ascended ever higher into the infinite to be completely hidden, in the Indian, he descended to the earth, and came to touch humanity, assuming their everyday form. Thus, the profound philosophical move towards abstraction which set off the chain of intellectual events that produced ‘disenchantment’ did not occur in India. Rather, here the process was a turn towards this-worldliness, humanization, a de-supernaturalization, or de-transcendence. If we want to call it secularization, we can, at the cost of utterly transforming the meaning of the term.

With this re-imagination of religion in its totality, the Vaisnavas set up a picture of an interconnected universe connecting God, as a creator, but also a presence that is always seeking contact with his creatures, Nature as the immense, and infinite system of all inanimate and sentient existence, and human beings whose task of worship is now transformed into realization of their own possibilities of perfection and divinity through forms of love-relations that are always abundantly strewn around them — in the relation with parents, friends, and lovers. Nature is involved in this arrangement, not as an inert ecology of things, and beings, but as a crucial participant. Because it is nature which reminds human beings of the possibility and responsibility of love through periodic phases of self-decoration — in spring, monsoon, and in the endlessly repeated occasions of the full moon. When their religious life settled down into its fully developed form, Vaiṣṇava elaborated a system of daily worship which, unlike other Hindu sects demanding elaborate rituals, urged devotees to do periodic personal prayers, chanting whenever inclined, carrying on with the workaday quotidian life. After sundown, Vaiṣṇava would gather in a temple for artistic remembrance of God in his form as Kṛṣṇa and recount his deeply moving human exchanges in Vṛndāvana — with his mother Yaśodā, with gopī women, with his playmates, other cowherds and the cattle which are part of their circle of intimate life, and finally, with Rādhā, his lover whom theological interpretations read as his own self alienated into a loving ‘other’ through whose eyes he can finally see himself. Rādhā, and her deeply gendered feminine affection, transparently, represents humanity. And this relationship of need is seen not as one-sided — only the humans’ requirement for succor — but as reciprocal, signifying God’s real need for love. Descension to earth, to the imperfect world of humanity, is divested of all associations of loss, but marked instead as fulfillment of God’s own godliness. *Kṛṣṇastu bhagavān svayam*²⁴: it is only as Kṛṣṇa that God finds his fullness.

²⁴ Krishna is God himself.

Religion is thus seen to be in constant change in the Indian historical world. But, if we pay attention to the intellectual and conceptual content of this specific religious form in late medieval times, it shows a direction or character that is totally different from the universal trajectory presented in Weber. Unlike the Weberian narrative of the West, where the scientific revolution intensifies the process of rationalization and encourages philosophers to move towards the God of Providential Deism, Indian religiosity also undergoes a deep turn that, according to Weber's analytics, could be termed *this-worldly*, but which does not oblige God to hide more deeply behind a created universe of infallible natural laws which, paradoxically, show his omnipotence but erase his presence. Vaisnava religion emphasizes the aesthetic presentation of nature and God's vivid readable presence in the worlds of nature and man.

God's Presence

Tagore's agamas were discontinuous and complex — as all traditions always are. At the center of Upaniṣadic reflection are two ideas which must exist in deep tension — that God not merely created the world, but in everything created he has left some cryptic intimation of his presence; and, still, it is hard to grasp his presence, and his nature. I think what Tagore particularly liked was the idea — distinctly implied in the Upaniṣadic hymns — that the wonder felt by the human mind at the mystery and majesty of creation gives rise to an emotion which humans can seek to capture in two distinct languages: the language of philosophy and the language of poetry. The language of poetry, because its objective is not precision or exhaustiveness, is more expressively apt, because it acknowledges that the emotion is ineffable, beyond human language. The only language that can express that something is beyond language but capture it in the same act is the language of poetry. Poetry alone is able to indicate the limits of language in language.²⁵

Poetry is an expression of the experience of residence on earth (to steal Neruda's expression). Tagore's sense of this inhabitation deploys elements from mainly the Upaniṣadic and Vaiṣṇava languages of the Indian tradition, but melds into them elements from modern Western Protestant thought and sensibility to construct a highly specific system of images. God is both the creator and central presence in this universe. But what is crucially significant in Tagore's thought is the unique manner he approaches one of the central problems of modern religious consciousness. God has three main manifestations in Tagore's artistic metaphysics. Some of his songs, collected in the section he himself named *Pūjā* (worship), straightforwardly direct their words of worship to God, the creator of this universe. Two songs, worn into meaninglessness by constant repetition on radio and television, evoke this sense:

In a star-filled sky, an earth filled with life,

²⁵ Hans Joas's recent study (Joas, 2021) has an interesting discussion about the role of the expressive in religious thought.

I find myself: in surprise a song rises in me.
 The world swings in the ebb and flow of time's endless tides,
 The blood in my veins feels its pull. That surprise fills me with song.
 I tread on grass in the forest paths,
 I am startled by flowers' scent,
 And discovered the gifts, strewn around, of joy.
 My song is born in that surprise. (Tagore, 1970, 430).

God's creative majesty is seen in the endless universe — where He reigns as the king (*mahārāja*). What is remarkable and unique here is the mode of seeing. God's majesty is revealed in the infiniteness and the intricacy of his creation. Note that both these qualities — infiniteness and intricacy — obstruct knowledge and reduce the possibility of knowing an object. But it is not the scale and limitlessness — which stresses the unencompassability of the universe by human cognition — that is stressed. Inherent in this revelation — placing the universe before our eyes — there is an *expressive* quality — which desires embodiment and invites a grasp by humanity (very similar in some ways to Hegel's understanding of *Geist*)²⁶ (Taylor, 1975, Chapter 3) which is here its primary defining feature. The shift from the cognitive to the aesthetic orientation towards the world is critical. God's creation is not constantly tending to exceed human cognition and therefore escaping a gathering into knowledge, but tending instead towards connection and thus inviting a gathering into human aesthetic perception and emotion. Although the entire world swings to time's rhythm, it also throbs in the rhythm of my blood.²⁷ It is present as unforgettable gifts of joy in small things: the feel of grass on the forest path and the sudden fragrance of flowers in the wafting air (Tagore, 1970, 577). Surprisingly, there is a constant desire on God's part to communicate with his creation, particularly with humans. What is miraculous — what we truly cannot understand, only marvel at with gratitude — is how something on an infinite scale can contrive to present itself in something so small, obviously as an intimation. Tagore's songs celebrate not just the infiniteness, not just the always available joy, but this arrangement of presences.

A second song adds a crucial element: *palaka nāhi nayane, heri nā kichu bhuvane, nirakhi śudhu antare sundara virāje*²⁸ (Tagore, 1970, 206). My eyes do not blink (but with this unblinking eye); I do not see anything in the world. Because this act of seeing has matured, or because the eyes have finally learnt to see, they only notice the

²⁶ Vivakṣā - which pervades all creation - is remarkably similar to the ideas about geist in Hegel.

²⁷ *Aśmāler je hillole joyār-bhaññāy bhuvan dole, nāḍite mor raktadhārāy legeche tār tān. Gitabitān, 430.*

²⁸ *Mahārāja e ki sāje ele hṛdaya pura mājhe, caraṇatale koti śaṣṭi sūrya mare lāje/Garba saba tutiyā mūrchi pade lutiya, sakala mama deha mana viṇāsama bāje/ E ki pulaka vedanā bahiche madhubāye, kānane jata puṣpa chila milila taba pāye. Palaka nāhi nayane, heri nā kichu bhuvane, nirakhi śudhu antare sundara virāje. Gitabitān, 206.*

beauty that resides inside my mind.²⁹ Even in these two brief songs, the arrangement of this universe is represented with precision. It is a characteristic architecture of God as a creator of the universe, with a nature that has an inherent quality of the beautiful expressivity. What is crucial in this beauty is not just the picturesqueness, or the pleasing quality of the things: beauty contains equally a 'desire' to be seen on its part — expressiveness or an 'offer' of itself.

God's Presence as Nature

Already, this representation of nature suggests a second form of God's manifestation in the world — now reaching increasingly towards the human — like the finger of God touching Adam's in the Sistine Chapel. If creation contains a divine intentionality, if the infinity of the universe is too overwhelming for ordinary human minds, that intentionality to communicate must be lodged in some other quality — more easily accessible to ordinary faculties of the human mind. Faculties can be trained: an athlete who likes jumping can, after 10 years of intensive training, seek to challenge Beamon's world-transforming leap. These intimations of divinity must be sufficiently mundane to be able to touch an untrained sense and lure it towards its higher treasures. To accomplish that task, God has a second form — *sāj*³⁰ or *rūpa*³¹: that works through His expression in and through nature. In Tagore's thought, nature in this second form is a distinct living presence. In Indic languages derived from Sanskrit, there is an easily intelligible word with resonant associations to express this idea — *prakṛti*. *Prakṛti* means nature, but it also means woman. This creates a slight awkwardness for grasping Tagore's visualization of *prakṛti*. He uses the term with high seriousness: a section of his song cycles is called *prakṛti* (nature) containing his seasonal songs (Tagore, 1970). Yet the image of God as nature is not feminine in any definitive sense. Only in a few songs and poems, there is a clear use of distinctively feminine attributes or verbs. Ordinarily, this figure — because it is definitely a figure — is either masculine or asexual. In Bengali writing, I have designated this figure as *prakṛti -puruṣa* (Kaviraj, 2021) because *puruṣa* can mean a being or a subject without a strong gendered connotation. Ascription of playful acts registered in grammatical use of verbs (especially *khelā*) describes this figure as intrinsically playful. But play introduces a second quality in nature's presence. Play cannot exist if something remains in an imperturbably steady state. It requires, by definition, changes of states. Nature, accordingly, exists in two states. Of course,

²⁹ This surprising claim — that when the eyes learn to see the world, they see a beauty that resides 'inside' — is uncannily similar to an ancient Kashmiri description of meditation: अन्तर्लक्ष्णं बहिरदृष्टिं नमिषेन्मेषे -वर्जिता एषा हि शाम्भवी मुद्रा सर्वशास्त्रेषु : *antarlakṣaṇaṁ bahirdṛṣṭiṁ nimeṣonmeṣa-varjitā eṣā hi śāmbhavī mudra sarvaśāstreṣu gopitā* : 'The attention is directed inwards, the unblinking look outwards: this posture (*mudrā*) indeed, called Śāmbhavī, is implicit in all scriptures.'

³⁰ *Sāj* can mean any aspect, or decoration, dressing up.

³¹ Because *rūpa* in both Bengali and Sanskrit can mean two related but distinct ideas: a form and form that has beauty. Any physical body has *rūpa*, form. But when he writes, *Āmi rūpe tomāy bholābo nā, bhālobasāy bholābo* [I shall capture your heart not with my beauty, but with my love.] *rūpa* carries the second meaning (Tagore, 1970, 307).

there is a constant, always available condition of nature that is of itself quite beautiful — waiting to be seen by human eyes. In a song describing ‘descent’ — a vastly important concept for Indian religious thought of all kinds (Gandhi, 2014) — he says using his poetic pronoun ‘I’ the representative of humanity: ‘flaming torches fill the night sky; there, in some bygone era I had an invitation—to live in the great expanse of paradise always drunk with light.’³² ‘But my mind did not love it. That is why I made a long journey across the sea of time, to this earth, under the sleepless sky. Here there is the gentle sweet whispering between water and land, in the verdant earth; here the grass is painted with many-colored flowers; light and dark embrace each other in the forest path. My mind fell in love: that is why I spend my time on this green earth immersed in play and pretense.’³³ What is to be noted, to prepare for our next distinction, is that the beauty of the sky with its flaming lights and of the earth with its forests, grass, and flowers is constant — its habitual, ordinary, non-transformative state. This is the first presence of nature.

Nature, however, exists in a second way: where it is full of *play* — transformations. Periodic spectacles of color, light, and flowers signal special times of festival — occasions that medieval Vaiṣṇava learnt to single out and celebrate. Evenings shrouded the exhaustion of tumultuous work by darkness — a time for collective singing and retelling of Kṛṣṇa stories, transforming the edge of the day with a brief transcendence before the night’s rest. Sprouting flowers of spring and clouds of the first monsoon rain after the long summer scorching of the earth signal these periods of delight. Nights of the full moon set a scene making nature expectant for human happiness. A combination of all these, the autumn full moon in a flowering forest in Vṛndāvana, is the scene of the *rasatīlā* — the circling dance of lovers — the greatest festival of the Vaiṣṇava. Here God, who has alienated himself into Rādhā to savor himself,³⁴ rides in a swing with her — signaling the swing of life.³⁵ The nature-figure — the *prakṛti -puruṣa* — is depicted as playful: he places his footprint on every bloom to say he has been there, yet his time for play vanishes as quickly.³⁶ The transience of this period of designated delight must be seized by humans and enjoyed in every possible way — through the most intense living of the human relationships of love, enjoying the beauty of nature, the Yamnuā in full tide, the light of the full moon, and the blooming forest. Even the inevitable ensuing period of *viraha* (of separation) is transformed from the sadness of loss to the anticipation of joy — through the taste of *vipralambha śṛṅgāra* — because even separation/longing can be beautiful in the beauty of the night.³⁷

³² *Āj tārāy tārāy dīptaśikhār agni jvale, nidrābīhīn gagantale.* 577.

³³ I am putting this in quotes, though this is paraphrase, a loose transfer into English.

³⁴ Her incarnation is interpreted in the classic Vaisnava work, the *Caitanyacaritamṛta*:

³⁵ Tagore has a spectacular poem with the title, *jhulan* (the swing) (Tagore, 1972,).

³⁶ *Kusume kusume caranacihna diye jāo, pare dāo muche; ohe cancala, belā nā jete khelā keno taba jāy ghuce,* *Gītābitān*, 428.

³⁷ *Viraha madhura hala āji madhurāte/ gabhīra rāginī uthe bāji vedanāte.* (Tagore, 1970, 376). Kashmiri aesthetic theorists make a distinction between two forms of *śṛṅgāra* (erotic feeling) – of union and separation (*vipralambha*).

God's Presence in Human Life

Eventually, we come to the end of this line of thought, and the final part of the arrangement. All this decoration of nature, her *śṛṅgāra*³⁸ — self-ornamentation — is to induce human beings to attend to love (*premā*), the central purpose of their existence. It is here that Tagore's drawing from the Vaiṣṇava tradition is the clearest. Vaiṣṇava theology gradually developed an *ethics* of seeing. It conceived of God as the creator of an infinite universe invested with a quality of beauty that interpellates human beings not by exciting their ambition to know, but alluring their aesthetic faculty of tasting beauty. Both knowledge and beauty are objects of seeking. Beauty is offered in two forms that are interlinked — the beauty of nature and things and the beauty of human relations. The full moon night in autumn is thus a reminder of the obligation to celebrate relationships of affection. The aesthetic faculty in human beings is also enlisted in the service of this orchestra of *āsvāda* by bringing in singing and dancing. Vaiṣṇava religious thought mobilized two distinct forms of writing to press this essentially philosophic argument — first, in the form of arcane theology, and second in the form of some of the greatest vernacular poetry of medieval India. Texts like the *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* and the *Ujjvalanīlamanī* advance rigorous philosophic ideas. Here too there is an orderly sequence of presentation of philosophic thinking: the *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* is mainly concerned with the definition and elaboration of the unfamiliar new axial concept of *bhakti*; its primary philosophical operation consists in carefully disassembling the theoretical apparatus of prior *rasa* aesthetics and then re-employing its internal concepts in a newly constructed philosophic structure which deploys — for entirely different purposes — each single concept of *rasa* theory.³⁹ But the center of this restructuring is a redirection of human effort in ethics and aesthetics. First of all, this philosophy strives to connect ethical and aesthetic aspects of human living by an inseverable bond, by training our minds to see good acts as beautiful. Secondly, it urges human beings to seek to live in Vṛndāvana, this world — but in an altered state from which all taint of suffering has been subtracted — which is a perpetual struggle, because the social structures within which individuals have to live are intractable. Censorious mothers-in-law are always exercising surveillance on young brides. The world is filled with sisters-in-law poisoned with suspicion. Vṛndāvana is not easy to create, and consequently, it can be present only interruptively. To the Vaisnavas, however, the consolation lies in the fact that memory of times of union, sometimes the darker memory of loss through separation or death are also beautiful, though tinged at times with grief. *Rasa* theorists had paved the way for complex desires and consolations of this kind through maintaining that any *sthāyī* — stable emotion — can be crossed by a *sañcārī* (crossing) emotion of a very different character. In this aesthetic world, there

³⁸ Which can mean both erotics and decoration.

³⁹ All the nine rasas are redeployed, just as all its secondary concepts — like *vibhāva*, *anubhāva*, *vyabhicārī*, or *sthāyī* and *sañcārī rasas*. This general conceptual structure of prior *rasa* theory extends from early texts like the *Abhinavabhāratī*, to the *Daśarupaka* with the commentary by Dhanika, the *Kāvya prakāśa*, down to *Sahityadarpaṇa*, the last text just about a century before Sri Rupa Goswami's texts on *Bhaktirasāmṛta Sindhu*.

is no contradiction in crossing the emotion of *srngara* — erotic joy — with a tinge of grief, or wistfulness. In Indian classical music, a composition in a single raga can easily flow from a mood of joy in union, to fear of separation and loss, and an overcoming of that fear in the different pleasure of anticipation of future union. Kṛṣṇa, God himself, perpetually wanders the world seeking Rādhā, the sign for humanity. He too enjoys most His own descent into this complex imperfect world. Vaiṣṇava theology accomplished a startling inversion — turning the imperfection of the human earth more pleasurable than the static perfection of prior religious heaven.

The Vaiṣṇava, however, lived and thought in a world utterly different from Tagore's. In the fifteenth century, theologians had to contend with the nominal existence of a few negligible schools of *nāstika* philosophic doctrine. Vaiṣṇava theorists effected a fundamental transformation of religious thought by re-directing its creative resources to focus on ethical and aesthetic possibilities in the human world. At least superficially, this seems similar to the redirection of thought during the Italian renaissance in respect of art: the immense efflorescence of painting and sculpture was simultaneously an exuberant expression of religious emotion and a celebration of human inhabitation on earth. In the odd language to which we have become habituated in Indian academic discourse (Kaviraj, 2018), this can be seen as a form of 'secularization' — but that is true only in the sense of redirection of philosophic and artistic attention towards the human world, not in the sense of any depletion of God's presence. Presence of God in the world is felt with greater intensity. This cannot be seen in any sense as a weakening of religious culture. In this sense, there was a profound divergence in the historical paths of religious evolution between Europe and India. Hindu religious thought took a sharp 'this-worldly' (*aihika*) turn in the fifteenth century but this was very different from the European turn towards the secular, through the scientific revolution leading to the rise of Deism. Rather, the new religion turned God powerfully towards a descent to the human world and made one of his selves a deep participant in human life. But in some ways, this also serves to subtract the element of the supernatural from religious ideas. This can be seen in the contrast between the themes pursued in Vaiṣṇava poetry and those in the other powerful popular literature in medieval Bengal — the *mangalkāvyas*. In the *Chandimangal* and *Manasamangal*, the reigning deities take recourse to the supernatural at every turn. By contrast, the theme explored in the Vaiṣṇava *Padāvalī* is the infinite transformation of states in human affection and erotics under the thin pretext of the story of Rādhā and Krishna. In some ways, therefore, despite its undeniable this worldliness, the Vaiṣṇava turn could be seen as going in an *opposite* direction to the European.

Tagore deploys this revolutionary turn to entirely obviate the profound Weberian problem.⁴⁰ Weber's cryptic conclusion from reading the history of Western religion was that the general process of rationalization, which was always at work inside religious thinking, intensified, as in many other fields of social and intellectual life, under conditions of modernity. Deism already constructed a universe with a hidden God from which a step towards complete disenchantment simply followed logically.

⁴⁰ For a detailed exploration of Weber, see Joas 2021.

In modernity, ordinary people accepted the 'immanent frame' and the resultant disenchantment of the world. Theorists who pursued the implications of this line of thinking after Weber⁴¹ have suggested therefore that in modern conditions human beings seek to 're-enchant' their world through spirituality and art (Taylor, 2007, chapters 16, 19, 20).

A critical step in Tagore's thinking is his avoidance of the belief that there is an obligatory historical movement towards disenchantment. This general move — because Tagore does not deal with the problem of disenchantment frontally — can be supported by serious historicist arguments. Any step taken by influential thinkers in the modern West are not, except in an abstract sense, an event in the thinking of all societies. It is true that because of the intrinsic rational power of arguments, or colonial epistemic dominance of Western thought over the rest of world cultures, such ideas can become hegemonic. But it is essential to have a clear conception/theory of ideational eventuation — the real event of an idea appearing in the world. Deism and the consequent ideas about mandatory secularization of cultures undoubtedly sent ripples across Indian cultural discourse. Some of Tagore's Brahmo forbears made sense of their own historical situation in distinctly Deist language.⁴² More significantly, academic discourse of Indian social science usually assumes a strongly universal logic of secularization as mandatory — something that is bound to occur sometime in future. But ordinary Indian consciousness and behavior show hardly any signs of comprehensive secularization. The actual discursive world around Tagore was deeply religious — without any semblance of disenchantment. Tagore, consequently, does not think through the category of a secularization or disenchantment process. His world is still intensely religious, though not averse to using new ideas from the West. Clearly, like his Brahmo colleagues, Tagore does not believe in the Hindu theory of karma or metempsychosis. That does not lead him to a secular world view, shorn of all religious beliefs. In fact, he continues to use many conventional Hindu concepts — but after taking them through a process of connotational thinning, so that these become metaphors or images without true conceptual content. His poetry about the pleasure of earthly inhabitation occasionally states, 'If You want me, I shall come back to the shore of this sea with its undulating waves of sorrow and joy' (Tagore, 1970, 232). Or his remembrance of a woman who must have been his first love in a prior birth.⁴³ But the sheer poeticism of these invocations reveals the literary, not metaphysical nature of such statements. These are artistic devices to express a thought or emotion, not content of deeply held religious beliefs.

True historicization obliges us to measure the historical distance between Tagore's time and ours — in which the 'world' has become allegedly more secular. But in the real Indian context, this probably merely means a small statistical increase

⁴¹ Anglo-American sociology widened the meaning of disenchantment at critical points. In a sense, it is this conception of 'secularization' rather than Weber's narrower notion of disenchantment that has become a default position in modern social science.

⁴² Though they certainly desisted from taking the step towards accepting the immanent frame.

⁴³ *Tomārei jena bhālobāsiyachi śatayuge śatabār, janame janame yuge yuge anibār* (Tagore 1972, 96).

in the number of academics who are drilled by their formal education to believe that they must start from a premise of unbelief in making an academically serious argument. The surrounding society's belief in God still appears overwhelmingly evident.

Human life is conceived in intrinsically anti-individualistic anti-monadic ways. We are what we have become through our most profound formative experiences. These are experiences of affection: which demonstrates that we could not become what we most intrinsically are by ourselves, entirely on our own, unmediated by the presence of others. That alone allows us to touch the depths of our own possibilities — shows how much we can care, how much we can love, and how much we can feel the loss of other selves. Love is a self's recognition of the existence of others as selves. Even separation from someone met long ago does not make us forget: we come to the realization 'that her unseen fingers cause in my dreams the ripples in the lake of tears' (Tagore, 1972, 598).⁴⁴ Memory — one among many functions of the imagination — can compensate for the lack of presence (Tagore, 1970, 330).⁴⁵ Poetic imagination fortifies human beings for all exigencies of love and loss. At the end of a human life, the overwhelming emotion is gratitude for this journey on earth, and an assertion that 'I loved, I loved this earth'⁴⁶ — this paradise fallen on this earth. But this life of fleeting and fragile moments of perfection also drives human beings to explore their own selves.

The first sun on the first day of existence, asked 'Who are you?'

It did not get an answer.

The last sun of the last day on earth, asked the last question: 'Who are you?'

It did not get an answer. (Tagore, 1972, 833.)

The World of History Around the World of Art

Tagore's art, clearly, offers a defiant negative response to the question of desacralization of the world and disenchantment as inescapable destiny of all societies. Even if we shift from Weber's language of disenchantment and substitute it by Durkheim's distinction between sacred and profane, we discover that for Tagore, extricating the world from an older sacral language does not mean an inevitable profanation of everything. It leads to sacralization by other means. The world remains meaningful and beautiful — though the presence of God and the conception of God himself are altered beyond recognition.

Historicizing our own reading, we have to ask the question that historicists must always ask themselves: has the world and the act of reading itself changed significantly between the time Tagore's text were written and my time of reading them? In late nineteenth century, Tagore's thought world was marked by colonial modernity

⁴⁴ *Dekhi tārī adṛśā aṅguli svapne aśru sarovare kṣaṇe kṣaṇe dey dheu tuli*

⁴⁵ In an extraordinary song on memory, Tagore describes its many modes: 'if I go far away, if this love is covered over by new love, if I stay so close that it is hard to know if I am there or not, like a shadow'. 'Tabu mane rekho'.

⁴⁶ *Bhālabesechinu ei dharaṅtre bhalabesechinu. Gītabitān*, 563.

— a modernity propelled by political-economic maneuvers of imperial power. The presence of colonial power — against which Indians felt themselves politically helpless — and its potential alliance with modern forms of philosophic and social thought loomed as a future threat, a threat that was not already a presence, but a real possibility in future. Thinkers like Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, Gandhi, and Tagore — with their different but equally delicate perceptiveness — warned about the peculiarity and transiency of this historical moment in time, that it was not going to last. Thinking people in India, they warned, must make a choice — whether they wanted to embrace this change and all its consequences or seek to obviate this as historical fate. But this required an accurate understanding of the nature of that historical moment — and its implications. Indians should not accept as fate their incarceration in a ‘waiting room of history’ (Chakrabarti, 2000b). They should view this as a beginning of a different path into futurity. This more open, more possibilistic perception of their moment in historical time is reflected in Tagore’s artistic world, and its tripartite arrangement of God, nature, and humans — a world that is at ease with itself, un-disenchanted. In his darker writings, for example, his play *Rakta Karabī* (Red Oleander) (Tagore, 1925, 2002), the power of modernity is represented by the king of the dark chamber whose power is irresistible, but his own sense of his ugliness does not allow him to come out into the light. It is not surprising that he has a deeply contradictory relationship of asking for deliverance/transcendence from Nandinī — the feminine principle of joy. Nandinī is eternally irresistible, but fragile and elusive — in this modern world. She is not threatened, in Tagore’s artistic world, by extinction. She can be forgotten — i.e., people might not know that she exists, she is certainly elusive, but she is an ineradicable presence in a human world. Thus, in Tagore’s thought, the danger of modernity exists as a threat, a potential wave of thinking that might overwhelm present Indian thought and sensibility, but it is not dominant in his present. Following him, we might consider if we have been persistently misled about our own historical present. If dominance in a culture is reckoned in terms of what ordinary people think, and what is implied in the way they behave, significant changes have occurred in Indian culture and sensibility; but still, it cannot be plausibly claimed that the default position of an ordinary Indian is that God does not exist. Hard atheists are still a small minority. Ordinary Indians are not — in a precise historicist sense — inhabitants of ‘a secular age.’ It is inside the academia that the fear and anxiety about ‘backwardness’ of religiosity is intensely felt. Academics in social sciences, therefore, start with a background assumption that the whole world — without exception — lives, along with Latin Christendom, in ‘a secular age,’ and consequently, the abundance of everyday religiosity seen around is an historically illegitimate abomination — i.e., ordinary people continue to be religious (an empirical truth) defying some fundamental law of history (a conceptual truth). Ordinary people appear oblivious of the existence of that law.

My own adherence to an atheistic position is not, I hope, a reflex of this academic background assumption, but based on the idea that it is economical not to assent to the presence of a being for whose existence there is no certain evidence. But a reasonable attitude towards the idea of God cannot be, in our age, simply focused on the narrow philosophical, ontological question of existence. Since ideas — irrespective of whether their objects are real or not — are real

and cause real effects, historical realism enjoins us to take into serious account consequences of belief in the idea of God. The aesthetic arrangement of ideas in Tagore's art — of God, his created world and nature, and his relation with humans — offers a picture that can be not only attractive to ontological atheists, but offer them ways of expressing their own sense of wonder at the world in a language which, because of their unbelief, they cannot generate on their own. In my case, I think, a reading of ancient philosophy altered my own understanding of this problem: by turning the meaning of the crucial term 'imaginary.' Earlier, the primary sense of the idea that God was a creation of imagination meant that it was an unreal thing taken for real. Reading Indian aesthetic philosophy changed my understanding of what imagination meant. *Kalpanā* — the Indic concept of imagination — is a primary faculty of the human mind contrasted with the other primary faculty of reason.⁴⁷ The function of imagination is not taking the unreal as real — which would imply that acts based on this idea would be inefficacious. Imagination here means the capacity to posit an idea with the knowledge that it is unreal, but, if taken as real, it would produce effects on the real world, and some of them might be of a character which may make what was unreal earlier real after a time. If we reconceptualize the imaginary — the creations of *kalpanā* — in this manner, it becomes clear that a great number of things are brought into being (*bhāvana*) in this way. Such objects include mundane things like the potter's making of the pot (*ghaṭa*) — a mere image in his mind initially, turned by acts into an object sufficiently objectified as to be separated from him entirely without any diminution of its reality. Other objects of a different kind of significance also fall into this category — Kant's view of 'practical reason,' constitutions in liberal political theory, the stock market in the capitalist economy, and finally, God himself — the longest lasting of these objects of *kalpanā*. Ontological commitment to atheism is not compromised by admiration and real enjoyment of *āstika* poetry. In fact, I can get two worlds for the price of one (after all, we live in a capitalist world where such offers are irresistible): I can have my *nāstika* world, but I can also have an *āstika* world right next to it, with a door through which we can communicate constantly — particularly when we face grief or need a language for the ineffable.

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⁴⁷ For Weber, an idea — if it is not rational, is irrational. In Indian thought, an idea, if not rational, can be imaginative. Or in Shulman's phrase, 'more than real' (Shulman, 2007).

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