

SPIRITUAL DEMOCRACY AND COPYRIGHT LEGACY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S GITANJALI

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Abstract:

The World poet Rabindranath Tagore is a widely recognized and influential figure in the field of literature. This research paper analyzes the concept of spiritual democracy as reflected in Gitanjali or Song Offerings, Tagore's Nobel Prize-winning collection of prose poems. The idea of spiritual democracy is explored through the lens of both Eastern and Western philosophies, particularly drawing on the insights of Steven Herrmann and Swami Vivekananda. Although the poems in Gitanjali are rooted in spirituality and devotion to the divine, they strongly oppose rigid orthodoxy and social hierarchies based on caste, religion, sect, or economic class. Instead, they uphold the principles of universal humanism and equality. The paper also examines the copyright history of Gitanjali and its public availability. Since entering the public domain in 2002, the collection has been translated into several languages, thus becoming accessible to a wider audience. The core life values reflected in Gitanjali—inner beauty, surrender, self-realization, spiritual peace, awakening of consciousness, simplicity, equality, and liberty—remain equally relevant in the 21st century.

Keywords: Spiritual Democracy, Universal Brotherhood, Divine Realization, Copyright, Public Domain

Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore's original Bengali Gitanjali will complete 115 years in 2025, while the English Gitanjali: Song Offerings will mark its 113th year. Given its historical significance, it is imperative to reassess Tagore's literary and spiritual legacy alongside the evolving copyright discourse surrounding Gitanjali. Recognized by the Swedish Academy, Gitanjali remains the only poetry collection to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, awarded to a non-European writer for the first time. The Bengali Gitanjali consists of 157 poems, whereas the English version is a prose collection of 103 poems. Through these verses, Tagore conveys a profound message of spiritual democracy that transcends national, social, and religious boundaries.

Tagore's vision challenges institutionalized religion, emphasizing direct, unmediated spiritual experience over rituals and formal doctrines. He views poetry as a means of divine communion, accessible to all regardless of social or religious identity. This philosophy aligns closely with the concept of spiritual democracy, which underscores universal equality, harmony, and ethical responsibility.

However, Gitanjali's copyright history complicates its ideal of free spiritual and literary expression. While intellectual property laws safeguard creative works, they also raise concerns



regarding accessibility and cultural heritage preservation. This research examines Gitanjali's copyright trajectory while analyzing its philosophical and spiritual advocacy of democracy and universal accessibility.

Understanding Spiritual Democracy :

The concept of spiritual democracy finds detailed expression in both Eastern and Western philosophies. In his book 'Spiritual Democracy: The Wisdom of Early American Visionaries for the Journey Forward', Steven Herrmann offers a comprehensive exploration of this idea. According to Herrmann, spiritual democracy is the realization of the oneness of humanity with the universe and all its forces. He considers it central to Walt Whitman's vision of global transformation (Herrmann). Drawing from diverse sources—including Alexander von Humboldt's *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (particularly the character Ishmael), Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and the philosophies of Carl Jung and William James—Herrmann identifies the essential components of spiritual democracy.

Human existence on Earth is sustained by the five natural elements: water, fire, air, earth, and sky. These elements signify humanity's intrinsic connection with nature. Similarly, human beings are interconnected with one another and with the cosmos. This unity fosters mutual respect, love, peace, and joy on both personal and collective levels. Spiritual democracy does not grant special privilege to any one religion, nation, race, or gender; instead, it affirms the equality of all human beings. This equality is not merely legal or political—it is spiritual and universal, arising from the lived experience of divine unity within all creation. The presence of divinity in every human being and in nature is a foundational principle of spiritual democracy. It upholds the idea that every human being is a carrier of divinity. This principle encourages individuals to harmonize their inner nature with the outer world, inspiring not only social change but also inner transformation.

In this sense, spiritual democracy is often referred to as the "science of God"—a process that begins and ends with the inner and outer nature of the human being, ultimately fostering global harmony between the soul and the universe. According to Aripova Zulfiyakhon Solijonovna, spiritual democracy leads to moral awakening and spiritual transformation in society, enabling the development of a social order grounded in ethical responsibility, environmental harmony, and peaceful coexistence (Aripova). American literary figures such as Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Herman Melville believed that spiritual democracy could establish unity and equality among humankind while promoting harmony with the rhythm of nature. Alexander von Humboldt's *Cosmos* introduced a scientific vision of the universe to American poetry. His spiritual outlook celebrated unity in diversity, where all life forms possess equal rights on this living planet. Whitman carried forward Humboldt's vision by integrating the "science of God" into his poetic masterpiece 'Leaves of Grass'(Herrmann)

In addition to the Western philosophical perspectives, Eastern traditions have also long embraced the ideals of spiritual democracy. In his iconic address at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Swami Vivekananda conveyed a powerful message of universal acceptance, tolerance, and the spiritual unity of all religions. He emphasized the ancient Indian ethos of "Atithi Devo Bhava" and advocated for broader equality among human beings,



transcending religious, cultural, and national boundaries. His speech asserted that all religions lead to the same divine truth, and that no one faith holds superiority over another. This vision of interreligious harmony and universal brotherhood aligns closely with the principles of spiritual democracy, which recognize the divine essence in every individual and promote peaceful coexistence rooted in mutual respect and moral responsibility (Vivekananda).

Tagore's Gitanjali embodies this ethos by rejecting sectarianism and dogma, instead celebrating the divine within all aspects of existence. At its core, spiritual democracy asserts that since all life originates from nature, each individual possesses an inherent divine spark, making spirituality an inclusive and egalitarian experience.

Beyond a mere philosophical construct, spiritual democracy serves as a guiding framework for ethical living and social responsibility. This aligns with Tagore's vision of moral and spiritual upliftment, where inner and outer harmony fosters a just and compassionate society.

Spiritual Democracy in Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali :

Rabindranath Tagore's Nobel Prize-winning Gitanjali, a collection of prose poems, presents a far-reaching vision of spiritual democracy that connects the individual soul with the universal. Tagore's poems transcend social, economic, and political boundaries to guide humanity toward inner well-being. The poems vividly express the spiritual bond between humanity and the divine that permeates all of creation. Tagore emphasizes inner spiritual awakening over external material pleasures. Through symbols such as the flute, flower, and river, he articulates the intimate relationship between humanity and divinity.

In Song 1, the human soul is compared to a lifeless flute, which comes alive through divine grace. The divine breath fills the flute with melody, binding creation with the rhythm of new life. Thus, it is the divine touch that awakens consciousness in human life. The poet's inner transformation is depicted through the flowing river or the flower offered in devotion—images found in Songs 2, 4, and 6. These symbols represent surrender, love, and humility. Such divine experience, Tagore suggests, does not depend on caste, religion, or social class but requires only purity of heart. In Songs 10 and 11, Tagore critiques orthodox religious rituals such as counting prayer beads or sitting in temples. Instead of advocating for the dominance of any particular community, he envisions an egalitarian spiritual society grounded in equality. For him, God is not attained through ritualistic chanting but through sincere work. The divine resides not in temples but in the company of laborers, workers, and the poor. Songs 7 and 9 emphasize that a simple, natural life and a pure heart lead a person to spiritual truth. Ornaments and extravagant attire, symbols of greed and ego, have no place in the realm of spirituality. In Songs 12 and 14, the poet articulates the all-pervading presence of the divine, not confined to any particular form or space. God is present in nature, in human conscience, and in humility. In this sense, spirituality is not limited to any one religion but supports the principle of unity in diversity. Tagore's thought promotes a holistic humanism that lies at the heart of spiritual democracy. His poem 'Where the Mind is Without Fear' is one of the most celebrated pieces in the collection. It envisions a spiritually liberated nation where people rise above mental and social slavery, develop self-respect and self-realization, and dream of true independence. This poem upholds the value of freedom within the framework of spiritual democracy.



Thus, Gitanjali is not merely a collection of devotional poems but a visionary text. Its significance is not limited to India; it has inspired human consciousness at the global level. The spiritual democratic ideals Tagore proposes remain equally relevant in today's world. However, the copyright history of Gitanjali raises questions about the universal accessibility of such a spiritually rich work. As Gitanjali embodies love, reverence, humility, and devotion—qualities essential for the growth of spiritual democracy—its distribution should ideally be more open and generous to reach wider humanity.

Copyright and the Legacy of Gitanjali :

Copyright History and Public Domain:

The Indian Copyright Act of 1957 granted Visva-Bharati University the rights to Tagore's literary works, including Gitanjali. Initially, Indian copyright law protected an author's work for 50 years after their death, meaning Gitanjali was expected to enter the public domain in 1991. However, a 1991 amendment extended the protection period by an additional 10 years, delaying public access until 31st December 2001. As of 1st January 2002, Gitanjali officially entered the public domain, enabling unrestricted publication and distribution.

Copyright Challenges and Digital Access:

While copyright laws protect literary works, they also limit public accessibility. Before Gitanjali entered the public domain, its availability was restricted to authorized publishers, making it less accessible to readers in regional languages and economically disadvantaged groups. Digital platforms such as Project Gutenberg and Internet Archive have since played a crucial role in disseminating Gitanjali freely, ensuring global access. The shift from copyright protection to public domain status has reinforced Tagore's spiritual democracy, making his poetry available without institutional barriers.

Translations and Wider Accessibility:

Tagore's Gitanjali has been translated into several Indian languages, further ensuring its universal accessibility. The Hindi Translation of Gitanjali was translated by Manoj Publications, with its 13th edition published in 2023, and its Marathi Translation: Ravindra Gitanjali, which includes Gitanjali along with other Tagore poems, was translated by Dr. Ram Mhaisalkar and first published in 1999.

These translations have expanded the reach of Gitanjali, making it accessible to diverse linguistic and cultural audiences, thus reinforcing its vision of spiritual democracy.

Recognized as part of the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works, Gitanjali holds immense cultural and literary significance. Its transition into the public domain ensures that Tagore's vision of spiritual and artistic freedom remains accessible to future generations.

Conclusion:

Gitanjali is a profound collection of spiritually democratic songs that convey a universal message of beauty, happiness, liberation, global peace, and self-realization. However, copyright restrictions initially limited its accessibility, creating a tension between literary



heritage protection and public access. Now that Gitanjali is in the public domain, its legacy and philosophical essence will continue to inspire future generations, fostering a deeper understanding of spiritual democracy and human unity. The case of Gitanjali highlights the importance of balancing copyright protection with the democratization of literary and spiritual knowledge, ensuring that transformative works remain accessible for collective cultural enrichment. In the 21st century, as the world grapples with challenges such as religious and political conflicts, social injustice, alienation, environmental destruction, and climate change, the concept of spiritual democracy as embodied in 'Gitanjali' becomes increasingly relevant. It offers a powerful message of unity by re-establishing the bond between humanity and nature, and among human beings. This philosophy encourages a return to ethical living, mutual respect, and inner awakening, values that are essential for creating a just and compassionate global society.

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