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The Ascetic and the Nomad: Deconstructing the Spiritual Genealogy of Upagupta and Tarapada in Tagore's Narrative Cosmos

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Abstract-- This paper explores the comparative spiritual and ontological dimensions of two of Rabindranath Tagore's most enigmatic protagonists: Upagupta from the poem *Abhisara* (The Tryst) and Tarapada from the short story *Atithi* (The Guest). By examining the characteristics of ascetic renunciation in Upagupta and the instinctive, nomadic impulse in Tarapada, this study debates the hypothesis that Tarapada represents a 'proto-Upagupta'—an ascetic in the making. Central to this analysis is the role of the feminine 'other'—Vasavdatta and Charushashi—who serve as catalysts for the protagonists' transcendence or evasion of worldly attachments. This paper investigates whether Tarapada's flight from domesticity is a precursor to Upagupta's ultimate embrace of the suffering world, or if they represent fundamentally different paradigms of the Tagorean 'wanderer'.

Keywords: nomad; ascetic; renunciation; detachment; domesticity

I. INTRODUCTION : THE DIALECTICS OF ATTACHMENT AND LIBERATION IN TAGORE

In the vast literary landscape of Rabindranath Tagore, the figure of the wanderer appears with haunting frequency. Whether as the sannyasi, the Baul, or the restless youth, these characters inhabit a liminal space between the domestic 'ghar' (home) and the infinite 'bahir' (outside). Two such figures—Upagupta, the Buddhist monk in *Abhisara*, and Tarapada, the young vagabond in *Atithi*—offer a profound study in the nature of detachment. While Upagupta operates within the structured discipline of monasticism, Tarapada's detachment is elemental, almost feral.

This paper seeks to interrogate the spiritual trajectory of these characters. *Is Tarapada, with his refusal to be anchored by love or comfort, a younger iteration of the monk who eventually meets the plague-stricken Vasavdatta?* By examining their interactions with Vasavdatta and Charushashi, we can discern the evolution of the Tagorean hero from a state of instinctive flight to one of compassionate presence.

Upagupta and the Architecture of Renunciation

In *Abhisara*, Upagupta is presented as a realised soul, a disciple of the Buddha who has already mastered the art of renunciation. His character is defined by a stillness that contrasts sharply with the sensory opulence of the world he inhabits. When Vasavdatta, the 'nagarlakshmi' or city-beauty, trips over him in the dark, her apology is wrapped in seduction mixed with humility: something for which she is trained. Upagupta's response is not one of repulsion but of prophetic timing: "When the time is ripe, I will come to you." He rejects not: only delays!

Upagupta's asceticism is not a denial of the world but a suspension of engagement until the ego of the world (embodied by Vasavdatta's beauty and wealth) has withered. His eventual 'tryst' with her occurs when she is no longer the queen of hearts but a pariah, disfigured by smallpox and cast out of the city. Here, Upagupta's characteristics are revealed as:

1. *Temporal Mastery:* He understands the transience of beauty (*anitya*). Hence stays untouched by both the polite offer or the seductive physicality of the woman.
2. *Compassionate Detachment:* He does not flee from her suffering; he enters it when his presence can truly serve as a balm. There is no repulsion in the monk rather a compassion for all, irrespective of who they were.
3. *Spiritual Integrity:* He remains unmoved by both the height of her glory and the depth of her degradation. A true sannyasi who knows what is his spiritual compass!

Tarapada and the Metaphysics of the Wanderer

In contrast, Tarapada in *Atithi* is a creature of pure impulse, though, guided by noble thoughts only. Unlike Upagupta, who has a destination and a creed, Tarapada is a 'guest' of the universe. He joins theatrical troupes, learns music, and masters crafts, only to abandon them when they threaten to become a 'bond'.



His detachment is not a result of philosophical meditation but an ontological necessity of his being. He is a child of nature who has an unsatiated yearning for learning whatever could be learned in this world. He stays in the world like a lotus leaf: untouched by the world around him, hence, unpolluted unlike the other boys of his age. Tarapada's characteristics include:

1. *Elemental Affiliation:* He is more at home with the river and the clouds than with human structures. Tarapada found peace and a deep connection with nature on the boat, watching the landscapes go by. He always remained calm and detached yet always active, like nature itself.
2. *Artistic Fluidity:* He absorbs culture and art effortlessly yet refuses to own it. He easily connected with the helmsman and oarsmen, even helping them steer and move the boat. He had also learned to play the flute skilfully and had recently left a gymnastics troupe to head further.
3. *The Instinct of Flight:* Every attempt to domesticate him triggers a deep-seated urge to move on. He was wary of forming deep connections, always leaving once people grew too fond of him. He had a wandering spirit and couldn't be tied down, even by love.

II. THE FEMININE COUNTERPOINT – VASAVDATTA AND CHARUSHASHI

The presence of the feminine in both narratives serves as the ultimate test of the protagonists' resolve. However, the nature of these women, the contexts of their existence and their impact on the men are vastly different. Although there is a unifying fact: both of them are specimens of feminine beauty.

1) *Vasavdatta: The Mirror of Impermanence*

Vasavdatta represents the sensory world in its most potent form. She is the 'abhisarika' seeking a lover, but in Upagupta, she finds a redeemer. Upagupta's refusal of her initial invitation is a rejection of the *maya* (illusion) of her physical form. Irrespective of the fact that he too is young and beautiful to look at, his resolve never wavers. Also, his return to her at the end of the poem is the completion of a spiritual cycle. Vasavdatta is the catalyst that allows Upagupta to demonstrate that true asceticism is found in the heart of suffering, not in the avoidance of it. Hence, he does not even refrain from keeping her head in his lap and apply balm over her wounds. In return, he acts as the touchstone that transforms Vasavdatta for ever!

2) *Charushashi: The Anchor of Domesticity*

Charushashi, the young daughter of the household that adopts Tarapada, represents the 'ghar' (home) in its most beguiling and demanding form. Her affection for Tarapada is possessive and turbulent. She wants to bind him through marriage and social standing. For Tarapada, Charushashi is the most dangerous of anchors. While he is intrigued by her tantrums, he, no doubt, enjoys her company and the comforts of her home. Soon enough, the spirituality in him senses the 'iron cage' of domesticity closing in. Unlike Upagupta, who can face Vasavdatta and remain unchanged, Tarapada must flee Charushashi to preserve his essence. The calm and control in him has failed at times when she had crossed the limits of what he could take- hence the absconding.

III. THE ONTOLOGICAL LINK – IS TARAPADA A PROTO-UPAGUPTA?

The debate of whether Tarapada is 'Upagupta in the making' hinges on the distinction between *vagabondage* and *asceticism*, and the blurring lines between the two.

The Argument for 'Upagupta in the Making': One can argue that Tarapada represents the 'raw material' of an ascetic. His instinctive rejection of property, status, and even love is the foundational state of *vairagya* (dispassion). He is in the 'neti, neti' (not this, not this) phase of spiritual evolution. Upagupta's calm is the result of years of such 'leaving'. If we view Tarapada's journey as a linear progression, his eventual exhaustion with the 'road' might lead him to a monastic order where his aimless wandering becomes a purposeful pilgrimage. Tarapada's flight from Charushashi is a necessary stage of self-preservation that precedes Upagupta's self-surrender to the service of others. Him being a child of nature is already a sign.

The Argument Against: Conversely, Tarapada may be seen as fundamentally different. Upagupta's path is one of *dharma* (duty/righteousness) and *karuna* (compassion). He waits for the moment of need: and makes himself available for the service. Tarapada, however, is driven by *ananda* (joy/bliss) in movement. He is not seeking liberation from the world; he is celebrating his liberty *within* it. Tarapada's departure at the end of *Atithi* is not a move towards a higher spiritual goal but a return to his natural state of flux: it is the chariot festival and *jatra* troupes. Upagupta is a pillar of stability in a changing world; Tarapada is a leaf in the wind.



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IV. CONCLUSION: THE CONVERGENCE OF THE TWO PATHS

Finally, while Upagupta and Tarapada occupy distinct stages of the Tagorean spiritual spectrum, they share a common rejection of the 'settled' life. Tarapada is the poetry of the road, while Upagupta is the philosophy of the shore. Despite the various odds, they do share quite a lot of parallels.

The presence of Vasavdatta and Charushashi highlights that for the Tagorean man, the feminine represents both, the greatest beauty of the world and its most binding attachment. Upagupta transcends this attachment through a deliberate 'wait', while Tarapada transcends it through 'flight'.

Whether Tarapada becomes an Upagupta is perhaps less important than the fact that both represent Tagore's belief in the 'Guest'—the idea that the human soul is never truly a resident of any one house, but a traveler through the infinite.

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