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RABINDRANATH TAGORE¹

(1861–1941)
Narmadeshwar Jha

Family background and early influences

Rabindranath Tagore was born on 7 May 1861. At some time towards the end of the seventeenth century, his forefathers had migrated from their native lands to Govindpur, one of the three villages which later came to constitute Calcutta. In the course of time, the family came to acquire property and considerable business interests through the pursuit of commercial and banking activities. They had particularly benefited from the growing power of the British East India Company. Rabindranath's grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, lived lavishly and broke the Hindu religious ban of those times by travelling to Europe, just like his contemporary, Rammohan Roy, the nineteenth century social and religious reformer.

Roy started a religious reform movement in 1828 that came to be known as the Brahma Samaj Movement. Rabindranath's grandfather supported Roy in his attempts at reforming Hindu society. Dwarkanath's son, Devendranath Tagore, also became a staunch supporter of the Brahma Samaj Movement. In order to encourage its spread, in 1863 he established a meditation centre and guest house on some land about 100 miles from Calcutta at a place called 'Santiniketan', the Abode of Peace.

Although deeply steeped in Hindu and Islamic traditions, Tagore's family contributed large sums of money for the introduction of Western education, including colleges for the study of science and medicine. This peculiar situation explains the combination of tradition and experiment that came to characterize Rabindranath Tagore's attitude to life.

Rabindranath's father was one of the leading figures of the newly awakened phase of Bengali society. He had been educated at one stage in Rammohan Roy's Anglo-Hindu school and had been greatly influenced by Roy's character, ideals and religious devotion. Devendranath Tagore was well versed in European philosophy and, though deeply religious, did not accept all aspects of Hinduism. He was to have a profound influence on his son's mental and practical attitudes.

Rabindranath was the fourteenth child of his parents. His brothers and sisters were poets, musicians, playwrights and novelists and the Tagore home was thus filled with musical, literary and dramatic pursuits. The family was also involved with diverse activities at the national level.

Important changes were taking place in Bengal at the time Rabindranath was born. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar had been attempting to reform the position of women in society. Schools using English as the language of teaching were being established, alongside the traditional Sanskrit schools. Vidyasagar had established Bengali-medium schools at different places in Bengal with little or limited government support. He had also established a centre to train teachers for these schools. Rabindranath attended this school and, as he says himself, owed his love of Bengali language and literature to it. He was also sent to a number of English-speaking schools, but he did not like their

teaching style and had no wish to be taught in a foreign language.

He gradually withdrew from formal schooling when he was around 14 years old. The remainder of his education was carried out at home through his own personal efforts and with the help of tutors in various subjects. He also had lessons from professionals in wrestling, music and drawing. The manner of his early schooling was to leave a deep impression on him.²

When Rabindranath was 12, his father took him to Santiniketan, the meditation centre established in 1863. During their brief stay there, Devendranath gave his son lessons in Sanskrit, astronomy and the scriptures that formed the basis of his reformed religion. After these lessons were over, Rabindranath was free to roam among the fields and forests. This routine continued when father and son journeyed on and stayed at Dalhousie in the Himalayan foothills. After lessons in Sanskrit, English literature and religion, the would-be poet explored the mountains and forests. Life in close proximity to nature was unknown to him in the urban surroundings of Calcutta.

The close and affectionate contact between teacher and pupil that he felt when his father taught him was also completely absent in Calcutta. It was this childhood experience of the willing pupil enthusiastically following lessons given by his father in the manner of a noble teacher among agreeable surroundings that guided Rabindranath in establishing a school at Santiniketan in 1901.

In 1878, when he was 17, he was sent to London by his father to qualify for the Indian Civil Service or as a lawyer. He took his matriculation examination and then joined University College, London. He came to like his lessons in English literature, and became exposed to British social life and Western music, both of which he enjoyed. But he returned home suddenly after some eighteen months without completing his education. However, he did gain the impression that human nature was perhaps the same everywhere.

Back in India he continued with his personal education and his creative writing and music. His *Sandhya Sangeet* [Evening songs], a volume of Bengali verse, came out in 1882. It was at about this time that he had a kind of mystical experience that led him to appreciate the unity of all that exists and himself as an integral part of it. In the same year, he wrote his famous poem *Nirjharer Swapna Bhanga* [The awakening of the fountain]. He became aware of his unusual talent as a poet. Between 1884 and 1890 various volumes of his poems appeared, together with a profuse output of prose articles, criticism, plays and novels.

Tagore married when he was 23. At this stage, beyond his literary pursuits, he had begun sharing his father's religious responsibilities. In 1890 he made a second trip to the United Kingdom, but came back after a month to look after the family estates.

This responsibility opened up new vistas of inspiration for him. Whereas his previous literary work had been primarily based on imagination, he now came to acquire a direct and intimate experience of the wretched life led by the poor Bengali peasants. This new experience led to the composition of *Galpaguccha* [A bunch of stories] (1900), and the many letters he wrote to his niece, subsequently published as *Chhinnapatra* [Torn letters] and *Chhinnapatravali* [A collection of torn letters], considered to be landmarks in the writing of Bengali prose and in describing the countryside of Bengal.

Tagore was overwhelmed by the economic, social and political misery in which the peasants lived. He gave a description of them at a later date:

Our so-called responsible classes live in comfort because the common man has not yet understood his situation. That is why the landlord beats him. The money-lender holds him in his clutches; the foreman abuses him; the policeman fleeces him; the priest exploits him; and the magistrate picks his pocket.³

These conditions, he thought, cannot be changed by appealing to the religious sentiments of the landlord, policeman or money-lender. In human society, necessity is a greater force than charity. The first requirement therefore is that people should discover the bond that holds them together as

a society. If there is one path likely to achieve this, it is education. Tagore realized from his own experience of the farmers' attitudes and their social behaviour that strength can be generated only in a self-reliant village society developing its own locus of power and its own momentum of growth. He turned again and again in various contexts to this theme of local self-reliance, local initiatives, local leadership and local self-government centring on co-operative ways of life. This could be the basis for reorganizing India's fragmented rural society, and could serve as an instrument of welfare. Tagore realized that education and village councils or *panchayats* were the only available instruments of economic and social change, and that the villagers should obtain various forms of expert help from outside to accomplish this change. As he says: 'Poverty springs from disunity and wealth from co-operation. From all points of view this is the fundamental truth of human civilization.'⁴

As a young landlord managing his family's rural estates, Tagore came to realize the possibilities of introducing education and co-operation to transform rural life. Thus he began to turn his thoughts towards the problems of education. He spoke publicly on 'The Vicissitudes of Education'⁵ in which he made a strong plea for the use of the mother-tongue. His first experiments in teaching also date from this period. He started his own school in Seliadah, the headquarters of his estate, to which he sent his own children to be taught by teachers in various subjects, including an Englishman to teach them the English language. He also started organizing co-operatives, schools and hospitals in the villages of his estates and tried to introduce improved farming methods. All these efforts for rural reconstruction went on while he pursued his creative writing. Tagore called this the period of his *Sadhana*—preparation, reflection, austerity and self-education for an active social life. He lived either at Seliadah or on his houseboat on the river Padma, visiting villages, talking to people and listening to their problems. Tagore's later educational experiments arose from this experience.

In 1901 he left Seliadah where he had undertaken these experiments and moved to Santiniketan where, with his father's consent, he started a boarding school. The Brahmacharyashram (or Ashram) School was inaugurated on 22 December 1901 with only a few pupils, his son being one of them, and with an equal number of teachers. It was to be run on the pattern of teachers and pupils living together amidst natural surroundings and willingly accepting an austere standard of living, often working with their own hands. Of the five teachers, three were Christians—two of whom were Catholics and the third was his son's English teacher from Seliadah. The orthodox Hindus were offended by this situation and he did not get any assistance from them. No fees were accepted from students, all expenses being borne by Tagore himself. In the course of time, this Ashram School expanded as the poet's reputation grew.

Life at Santiniketan left its impression on the poet's literary work. He wrote about India's past and present, and stories of noble self-sacrifice. He published more realistic novels such as *Choker Bali* [Eyesore] (1901), *Naikadubi* [The wreck] (1903) and *Gora* (1910). He was trying to discover the eternal India that succeeds in achieving unity amidst a bewildering diversity of races, cultures and religions.

In 1912 Tagore left for the United Kingdom once again. Some of his poems and writings had already been translated into English and had attracted the attention of the well-known English painter Sir William Rothenstein and the poet W. B. Yeats. He made such an impression on the British writers and intellectuals that he was at once accepted as a great poet and intellectual. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in November 1913 and came back to India after visiting the United States of America, delivering there his 'Sadhana' lectures (The Realization of Life, 1913). In 1916 Tagore went abroad again to Japan and then to the United States of America delivering lectures, published later in two volumes as *Nationalism* (1917b) and *Personality* (1917c).

This international experience gave him a new idea, that he must bring his country into

contact with the world at large. He felt that overemphasis on narrow nationalism led men and countries into paths of conflict. There should be an institution that emphasized the unity of the world's cultures and streams of knowledge. He considered Santiniketan to be that institution. He was thus already contemplating the foundation of Visva Bharati, an international centre of culture and humanistic studies.

The foundation stone of Visva Bharati was laid on 24 December 1918. A separate institution called Sri Niketan was established in 1921.⁶

Education in India: historical background

By 1857, four years before Rabindranath was born, British power in India had been consolidated and the general foundation of a colonial system of education had been laid. The stated aim of British policy was the promotion of English studies with English language as the medium of instruction and the creation of a class of Indians who had been brought up in an English way. As a result, the traditional system of village, Sanskrit and Islamic schools languished.⁷

National universities had been established at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, but secondary schools and universities were still the reserve of a small elite. The gulf between the fortunate upper classes and the vast masses of rural poor continued to widen. On the other hand, great socio-economic changes were taking place in the country, and especially in Calcutta and in other towns as they grew in size. Railways were built; factories sprang up; municipal water supplies arrived. A new class of people came to adopt European dress, manners, attitudes and life styles. Old values and traditions came to be questioned. It was a period of social upheaval and reforms in India.

Towards the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries the middle class, which had come into being following the establishment of universities in 1857, began to protest against the imposed system of education and its parallel language policy. It is true that in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the British system was being introduced, a powerful group of urban classes expressed their preference for such studies. But, seeing the consequences and with a growing awareness of the Indian cultural heritage and history, the middle classes had come to resent the education which was being offered. While Tagore preferred the traditional system to the new one, he did not want to bring it back without considerable changes.

This period also saw a rise in Indian nationalism. There was resentment against an imitation of British lifestyles and against British rule, coupled with increased awareness and appreciation of India's cultural traditions. Tagore's educational and other writings of the period reflect this nationalist trend. His concern with educational reform grew in intensity after 1901, and more so after 1905. Dissatisfaction with the existing system of education led to a general concern with reform.

A tragic series of family bereavements probably caused Tagore's withdrawal from the growing national struggle for independence in the country. He retired to his Ashram School to concentrate on its development and on the task of village reconstruction that he had initiated at Seliadah.

Tagore on education

The difficulty in writing about Tagore's educational ideas lies in the fact that he did not set them down in a connected account. His views are found scattered in a large number of independent essays and journal articles, in speeches to various audiences and in letters to individuals over a number of years.⁸ Addresses to foreign audiences about his school at Santiniketan and on Visva

Bharati are, of course, in English. Only recently have attempts been made to collect and publish these pieces in their original Bengali. There has been a tendency to group these diffuse writings into three broad divisions.

THE FIRST PHASE: 1892–1901

Tagore considered lack of education to be the main obstacle in the way of India's progress and at the root of all its problems. The prevailing, colonial education system he found unsatisfactory since the only objective it appeared to serve was to produce clerks to man government offices and British businesses in India. The basic objectives of any worthwhile national education system, such as promoting creativity, freedom, joy and an awareness of a country's cultural heritage, were completely ignored.

The education offered was not even modern, since it was unrelated to any developments going on in the field of education outside India. Irrespective of the content, the medium of education was English—a foreign language—so that learning this language was an additional burden for young Indian students. Particularly, the educational process failed to develop scientific attitudes and the spirit of inquiry. On the other hand, it divided the Indian people into two classes: those who received this education and those who did not. The second group, comprising nearly everyone living in the countryside, remained almost completely cut off from the affluent, educated, English-speaking class living in cities and towns.

In the pre-colonial system, a common language promoted an unobstructed flow of culture, even if formal education was not available to all. However, there was no place even in informal educational activities for modern subjects, like history, science and geography, and it did not promote objectivity in thinking, nor facilitate desirable social change.

THE SECOND PHASE, 1901–18

Tagore's preoccupation during this second phase was with developing an appropriate system of national education for India. Each nation was different and this fact should be reflected, he thought, in its system of education. The Ashram School at Santiniketan was founded in 1901 on the basis of the ancient Indian forest schools.

In *Tapovan* [The Forest Schools of India] (1909) Tagore asserted that the forest school was typical of the Indian system of education with its emphasis on three basic elements of Indian culture, namely *Advaita* (non-duality) in the field of knowledge, friendship for all in the field of feeling, and fulfilment of one's duties without concern for the outcomes in the field of action. In his view, the forest school integrated education with *Sadhana* (disciplining one's senses and one's own life). But Tagore updated this form of school to include science and similar modern subjects.

The second significant essay of this period was *Shikshar Vahana* [The Vehicle of Education] (1915) emphasizing the importance of the mother-tongue as the medium of education. The use of English in education hindered assimilation of what was taught, and kept education confined to urban centres and the upper classes. Thus, if the vast rural masses were to benefit, it was absolutely essential to switch over to the use of Bengali in the context of Bengal at all levels of education, including higher education. The ideal school, according to Tagore, should be established away from the turmoil of human habitation under an open sky and surrounded by vistas of fields, trees and plants. Living in a forest was also associated with austere pursuits and renunciation. The vast background of nature represented a grand perspective against which all objects, all feelings assumed their due proportions. He also referred to the significance of educating feelings as distinct from educating the senses and the intellect. The word 'forest' used in this context, he explained, was not dense jungle, but *Tapovana*, the forest clearing.⁹

A national system of education in India should try to discover the characteristic truths of its civilization. Those truths are not commercialism, imperialism or nationalism, but rather universalism. The aim was all-round development of the individual personality through harmonious interaction and union of the spirit with the environment.

About the place of religion in education, Rabindranath said: 'Nature and human spirit, wedded together, would constitute our temple and selfless good deeds our worship' (*Dharma Sikhsha*, 1912).

Tagore himself was a teacher at the Ashram School and also gave thought to educational methods. He taught English language, and in the evenings related stories from Indian history to the children. He wrote plays for the students to perform and entertaining verse for children, as well as simple textbooks in various subjects.¹⁰

Tagore was against any conspicuous emphasis on materials, buildings, furniture or books that imitated Western educational institutions in India. He thought that this would make education too expensive for the common people. He was against bookish learning:

Books have come between our mind and life. They deprive us of our natural faculty of getting knowledge directly from nature and life and have generated within us the habit of knowing everything through books. We touch the world not with our mind, but with our books. They dehumanize and make us unsocial.... Let the students gather knowledge and materials from different regions of the country, from direct sources and from their own independent efforts.¹¹

THE THIRD PHASE (1918–41)

Visva Bharati, Tagore's conception of a world university, was founded at the end of the First World War with a determination to go beyond aggressive nationalism and to build friendship with all nations.

After 1913, his travels abroad made him increasingly aware of what was going on in other countries. He came also to know a large number of intellectuals in the countries he visited. This in turn led him to emphasize co-operation between East and West, North and South (in today's jargon), in the field of humanistic studies and culture. From children's education and rural development, he increasingly shifted his attention to university education and developing the surrounding villages as one of the university's functions during this third phase. He wanted to devise an alternative form of education.

In every nation, education is intimately associated with the life of the people. For us, modern education is relevant only to turning out clerks, lawyers, doctors, magistrates and policemen.... This education has not reached the farmer, the oil grinder, nor the potter. No other educated society has been struck with such disaster.... If ever a truly Indian university is established it must from the very beginning implement India's own knowledge of economics, agriculture, health, medicine and of all other everyday science from the surrounding villages. Then alone can the school or university become the centre of the country's way of living. This school must practise agriculture, dairying and weaving using the best modern methods.... I have proposed to call this school Visva Bharati.¹²

Tagore was convinced that no form of education offered in India, be it at school or at university level, would be complete without knowledge of patterns of rural living and without an effort by the universities to rejuvenate rural life. He considered this to be an important aspect of Visva Bharati's total activity.¹³

Writing about them in 1919 in his paper *Ashantosh Karon* [Cause of Dissatisfaction], he expressed his deep anguish at the contemporary attempts in India to establish new universities in exactly the same mould as existing ones due to a lack of will or a lack of courage to attempt new forms. This had become imperative in view of the fact that the civil service was saturated and, as the student members grew, the majority of graduates failed to get clerical or any other type of white-collar jobs and were good for nothing else. The time had thus come, Tagore urged, to

attempt a change in the aims of university education.

How to make education real and our life force? In the addresses he gave and the essays he wrote from 1919 to 1936 he tried to answer this question. In his own words:

We must try to understand how Indian genius expressed itself [...] Unless we try to put these together and discover the integrating factors behind these diverse streams of thought and make them a subject of study at our universities, we would only be borrowing knowledge from abroad. The natural habitat for knowledge is where it is produced. The main task of universities is to produce knowledge, its dissemination is its secondary function. We must invite those intellectuals and scholars to our universities who are engaged in research, invention or creative activity.¹⁴

While nations sought primarily to give their citizens a means of livelihood through education, Tagore believed that there was a more important aim—that of personal fulfilment and self-improvement. It was important to borrow knowledge and experience from abroad, but not to use them as the foundation for Indian education.

Even so, if there was one European quality which Indian university students must acquire it was ‘the desire to know, to find out about the laws of nature and to use them for the betterment of the conditions of human beings’.¹⁵ Science and its applications in the form of technology have led to the power and prosperity of Western countries. Unless India acquired knowledge of science and technology through its universities and schools, poverty and powerlessness would continue. To transform life and make it richer, healthier and more educated, it was imperative to resort to technology and science. But Tagore wanted science to be taught along with India’s own philosophical and spiritual knowledge at Indian universities.¹⁶

However, science without the constraint of self-knowledge, without appreciating that the quest for knowledge is the most important aim of human existence, leads to an endless desire for material goods and well-being, and the meaningless pursuit of the instruments of war and power, which are often the origin of conflict between nations and end, ultimately, in the suppression of the weaker by the stronger. That is why both spiritual and scientific knowledge are considered by Tagore as equally important.

In an address on the functions of the university,¹⁷ Tagore argued that a university is an attempt by a nation to aggregate knowledge at one place, to develop it and to disseminate it to the younger generation.

Long before universities in the West had been established, there existed in India universities, such as Nalanda and Vikramshila, where various branches of knowledge had been pursued by scholars for centuries during the Buddhist period of India’s history. Students came to these universities from far and near in Asia to learn about the subjects taught, and to live with the teachers who were respected for their exemplary way of life. When universities came to be founded in Europe, the hold of religion was loosened. New methods of acquiring knowledge led to rapid growth in the fields of social, physical and life sciences. Modern universities collect existing knowledge in various fields from within a country or abroad, preserve and develop it and make it available to the younger generations. But contemporary Indian universities had not been concerned about collecting and preserving the national heritage, and enriching it by fusing it with knowledge coming from abroad. Neither had they been concerned about improving life in the villages. ‘Universities here are like a lighted railway compartment in a train passing through the countryside which is enveloped in darkness.’

Furthermore the use of the English language at universities presents a language barrier confining the flow of knowledge and information. Unless a beginning was made in using the mother-tongue as a medium of instruction in regional universities the flow of knowledge to the countryside would not be restored. Of course, English was needed to build bridges so as to benefit from the growing corpus of knowledge existing abroad in the fields of science, technology and

other subjects, but its central importance in India's education process would cease.

In his *Shikhar Suwangeekaran* [Make education your own] (1936), he returned to his recurrent theme of the unnaturalness of the system of education in India, its lack of links with the nation and its management which was in the hands of a foreign government. The working of the government, its courts of law and its education system were conducted in a language completely unintelligible to the majority of Indians. He contrasted the situation in India with what he had seen in the USSR and in Japan, where the governments had been able to educate their people within a very short time. Educating India's entire population and restoring the flow of culture from the educated classes to the rural population would not come about unless the mother-tongue was adopted as the medium of teaching.

The second experiment: Sri Niketan

Santiniketan developed continuously from 1901 to 1921. The school, called Patha Bhawan, eventually became affiliated to Calcutta University and students could thus take the matriculation examination. For a long time, the funding of the school was entirely assumed by Tagore. This was possible because teachers' salaries were very low. Most of Tagore's personal income, proceeds from the sale of his property, most of the Nobel Prize money and royalties from his books were the sources of school finance. Only after receiving the Nobel Prize and after being knighted by the British did the Indian Government begin to take an interest in him.

Tagore was convinced that some new form of schooling could be worked out for the village children in India based on life in the countryside. He had purchased an old building and some land at a village called Surul, not far from Santiniketan. Fortunately for Santiniketan, Tagore met Leonard Elmhirst in the United States in 1921. Elmhirst was at that time reading agricultural science at Cornell University and was keen on spending some time in India doing rural reconstruction work. Tagore requested Elmhirst to join him. He told Elmhirst that Santiniketan was surrounded by a number of villages which, 'for some reason, appeared to be in a state of steady decline'.¹⁸ There was no sign of effort on the part of the villagers: there was no joy, no food, no health, no idea of the importance of their own initiative and no co-operation among them. Tagore wanted Elmhirst first to find out why and then suggest remedial action. The objective was to raise the villagers' income, but the higher aim according to Tagore was to make them happy.¹⁹

Tagore was somewhat disappointed that Santiniketan had failed to achieve the ideal of bringing scientific knowledge to bear on life in the countryside. In order to improve the human condition in the villages of Eastern India, the population had to throw off their belief in fate and realize the importance of depending upon their own efforts. This is what Tagore had in mind when he launched the rural reconstruction work at Sri Niketan in a school called Shikshasastra. The objective of the new school was to provide an all-round education for village children, enabling them to earn a decent livelihood but also equipping them to improve rural life in all its aspects.²⁰

From the very beginning, the major thrust of the programme at Sri Niketan under Elmhirst came to be increasing the productivity of the land. But Tagore also wanted a total improvement covering agriculture, education, health and social life in the villages. Agricultural research and experiments would be undertaken at Sri Niketan and the fruits of this research were to be carried to the villages. At the same time, medical care and the eradication of malaria were considered equally important. At the centre, specialists in various fields worked together to overcome the difficulties of rural life. In addition, a scout movement was organized to mobilize the children as a starting point for drawing their parents into the village development programme.

A fundamental area of instruction at Sri Niketan was handicrafts; it was compulsory for all students to learn a trade. Another major activity was the launching of some 200 co-operative societies for agricultural credit, irrigation, granaries, etc. Experiments were made on new crops and

on new varieties of existing crops that appeared to be suitable for local conditions. A dairy farm gave practical demonstrations of animal husbandry on scientific lines. The villagers were expected to adopt rural industries to supplement their income. The village welfare department initiated public works (repairing and excavating reservoirs), looked after village schools, maintained a mobile library for villages, organized social and cultural activities and ran the scout movement. There was a health section with a central dispensary; and a maternity and child-welfare section was added in 1940.

Sri Niketan aimed at combining work with joy. Picnics, excursions, games, music, theatrical performances and celebrating socio-religious festivals constituted regular features of the calendar. New Year's Day, the Rainy Season festival, the New Rice festival, the Spring festival were—and still are—all regular features. Tagore added *Halkarshan* (ploughing the land festival) and *Van Mahotosava* (tree planting). Apart from adding joy to dreary village life, some of these festivals brought students and villagers to work together.

For years Tagore tried to convince his countrymen through his speeches, stories, novels, poems and songs to work for rural revival. The call went unheeded until Gandhi came on the Indian political scene. Single handed, the poet had started his work: 'They call you mad. Wait for tomorrow and keep silent' (Poems, 1942).

Of course, turning out songs is my proper vocation. But those who are unfortunate cannot afford to limit their choice to the works they do. They must also bear the burden of tasks they cannot do. The scale of our enterprise can never be a matter of pride to us, but let us hope that its truth will be. Ideas, if they have the vitality of truth in them, grow and spread in the course of time.²¹

How correct Tagore was in this respect. The entire programme followed at Sri Niketan for rural development was adopted by India's five-year plans as the correct approach to rural community development.

Influences

Apart from the three remarkable Englishmen who were Tagore's collaborators, namely C. F. Andrews, William Pearson and Leonard Elmhirst, numerous other scholars came to Santiniketan at the poet's invitation to participate in the teaching programmes.²²

Tagore disowned being influenced by any of the well-known educationists. It was not any new theory of education but the memory of his schooldays that led him to establish his residential schools. 'I established my institution in a beautiful spot away from the town where the children had the greatest freedom possible under the shade of ancient trees.'²³

Through contact with nature, by making them aware of community relations and with the help of literature, festivals and religious teaching, he tried to develop the souls of his children. But this turned out to be not quite enough, so he introduced work education as 'a joyous exercise of our inventive and constructive energies that help to build up character.'²⁴

In many respects Tagore's ideas relating to the education of children resemble those of Rousseau, Fröbel, Dewey, Montessori and others. For instance, Rousseau considered nature as children's teacher, as does Tagore, but unlike Rousseau he retains a significant role for the teacher. Fröbel and Tagore both advocate harmony with all that exists to be achieved through education; they are both in favour of play and domestic activities as part of education during infancy and activity in the community as part of the educational process during childhood. Fröbel stops here; but Tagore includes subsequent education under the purview of activity-oriented education. Both are for joy and festivities, and an awareness of the child's dignity as part of the educational environment. The resemblances between Fröbel and Tagore's ideas are indeed striking. The same is

true to some extent of his approach to children's education compared with some of his contemporaries, such as Dewey, Maria Montessori and Tolstoy.²⁵

As Sarkar (1961) points out, Tagore was familiar with many of these views, but all who knew the poet were aware that he was in no way indebted to them. His views were linked with the development of his own mind and spirit, and his profound understanding of India's traditional educational experience and philosophy.

His activity-oriented school for village children appears to have inspired Gandhi's ideas on basic education. Tagore's influence can also be seen in the report of the Kothari Commission on Education in India.

In Tagore's view, the higher aim of education was the same as that of a person's life, that is, to achieve fulfilment and completeness. There was a lesser aim, that of providing the individual with a satisfactory means of livelihood, without which a person would not be able to satisfy his/her basic requirements and thus fail to achieve either of these two aims. Tagore also imagined that the limitless development of man is possible only in an environment free from any kind of bondage. Apart from the scriptures, it would seem that he was influenced by the attitudes that arose in Europe during the Renaissance and the Age of Reason.

In his view, education was not intellectual development alone. It should also develop a student's aesthetic nature and creativity. The quest for knowledge and physical activity in an agreeable environment were integral parts of the process. Freedom and creativity are linked in Tagore's thought, one conditioning the other. The more people go beyond the limitations of their animal nature, the closer they come to humanism, freedom and unity and are then able to develop their creativity. This quest alone gives a meaning to life, and education is an effort to make life meaningful. Here the aims of the individual and those of the community have become almost one.

Tagore did not neglect the lesser aims of life and education. In the colonial system of education that existed at that time the whole focus of education was on employment, to the complete neglect of the higher aims of life. His intention was to correct this wrong emphasis, without ignoring science, technology and agricultural sciences, as well as training in village crafts. Without these, it was not possible to revive the derelict life of rural India. Both categories of aims should thus be considered the objective of education.

It was necessary, Tagore felt, to make the younger generation aware of their national cultural heritage and to grasp its significance for them. At the same time, education should bring children face to face with the cultures of other countries and persuade them to learn from them.

Tagore put great emphasis on the use of a national language as the vehicle of education at all stages of education. He wanted Indian universities to integrate themselves with society and make an effort to educate people living in the countryside. He did not want education to remain confined to the cities and to particular classes of society.

He was very much concerned with women's education. His educational institutions have almost always been co-educational and the number of female students is conspicuously large at Santiniketan. He wanted women and men to be offered similar theoretical courses with separate practical courses for women, since their roles in life differed from those of men.

Tagore considered teachers to be very important in any scheme of education. He wanted teachers to help young children to grow on their own as a gardener helps the young plants to grow. He wanted to use education as an instrument of change to make Indian young men and women more rational and less subject to meaningless social and individual rituals.

Tagore wanted his students to acquire a scientific temper; in other words, he wanted teachers to stimulate constructive doubt, the love of mental adventure, the courage and longing to conquer the world by enterprise and boldness in thought and in action. These were the virtues cultivation of which had made the West forge ahead.

Tagore was against any form of corporal punishment to impose discipline. He wanted

discipline to come from within, from the pursuit of noble and high ambitions in life. Discipline would follow naturally when minor impulses and desires were willingly forgone to pursue grand creative desires.

He wanted his students to think in terms of the whole of mankind. He wanted them to become universal men and women like himself and to overcome feelings of narrow nationalism in order that the world could live and grow in peace and fellowship.

The poet passed away in 1941. The two institutions specific to Tagore's educational ideas and experiments still survive in the form of Patha Bhawan (the school section) at Santiniketan and in the form of Sikshasastra and Sri Niketan—of course, they have been modified a good deal over this long stretch of time. They form the core of the Santiniketan ideal. Visva Bharati survives too; it is now a central university and has changed considerably. The emphasis that Tagore placed on the teaching of the fine arts and crafts, and on music, continues in the form of two separate autonomous institutions under the general supervision of Visva Bharati. These institutions are: the Kala Bhawan (the school of fine arts); and the Sangeet Bhawan (the school of music and dance). Emphasis on the teaching of various Indian languages and on the teaching of Asian cultures, and the presence of an international faculty are not very evident. But there is a Cheena Bhawan (the school of Chinese language and culture), Hindi Bhawan, a School of Islamic Studies, and a good number of students from Far Eastern countries, particularly in the Kala Bhawan and the Sangeet Bhawan.

But one can see that Tagore's memory still dominates life on the university campus. The following poem from *Gitanjali* [Song offerings] brings together the ideals the poet kept before the nation, before mankind, and before his educational institutions.

*Where the mind is without fear,
and the heart is held high,
Where the world is not broken up into fragments
by narrow domestic walls,
Where the words came out from
the depths of truth,
Where tireless striving stretches its arms
towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its
way into the dreary desert sand of dead habits,
Where the mind is led forward by thee into
everwidening thought and action -
Into that heaven of freedom,
My father, let my country awake.²⁶*

Notes

1. Rabindranath Tagore's reputation as a poet has so eclipsed his contributions to other fields that these have seldom received the attention and appreciation they deserve. The purpose of this profile is to give a more comprehensive account of Tagore's educational views and experiments and to indicate the influences which made him devote the latter half of his life to education in India in general and to the rural education problem in particular.
2. Rabindranath Tagore, 'My School', in: *Personality*, London, Macmillan, 1917. For a detailed account of his early schooling see: *My Reminiscences*, London, Macmillan, 1917 (a translation of *Jivan Simiti*); and *My Boyhood Days*, Santiniketan, Visva Bharati, 1940 (a translation of *Chhelebelā*).
3. R. Tagore, *Social Work*, 1915. Translated into English by B. N. Ganguli for the Seminar on the Human Factor in the Growth of the Rural Economy, *Visva Bharati Quarterly* (Santiniketan), vol. 7, 1961, p. 19–30.
4. Ibid.
5. Rabindranath Tagore, 'Shiskar Herpher' (1892) in: *Siksha* [A collection of essays on education], p. 17–19, Visva

- Bharati, 1990. English translation: R. Tagore, *Towards Universal Man*, Bombay, Asia, 1961.
6. K. Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, Santiniketan, Visva Bharati; B. Chandhuri et al. (eds.), *Introduction to Tagore*, Santiniketan, Visva Bharati, 1982; Bhabatosh Dutta, *A Short Biography*, Santiniketan, Visva Bharati.
 7. For an account of education under British rule, see: H. B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness*, Bombay, Asia, 1962.
 8. See: Tagore, *Siksha*, op. cit.
 9. 'Tapovana' in Tagore, *Siksha*, op. cit., p. 78–101.
 10. Tagore wrote the following English primers in Bengali: *Engrezee Sopan*, 2 vols., 1904, 1906; *Engrezee Patha*, 1909; and *Anuvad Charcha* [A discussion of translations] in two parts: 'Engrezee Sruti Siksha', 1929; 'Engrezee Sahaj Siksha', 1930. At the age of 70 he wrote a primer in Bengali for young children: *Sahaj Patha*, 1932.
 11. 'Avaran' [children's clothes] (1906) in *Siksha*, op. cit., p. 15–77.
 12. Rabindranath Tagore, *Addresses by Tagore*, p. 9–10, Santiniketan, Visva Bharati, 1963. For an English translation, M. Das Gupta, *Santiniketan and Sri Niketan*, Calcutta, Visva Bharati, 1983.
 13. This was an intensive period of university building in India, for instance: Banaras Hindu, 1915; Patna, 1917; Mysore, 1916; Osmania, Hyderabad, 1918; Aligarh, 1921; Lucknow, 1921; Dacca, 1921; Delhi, 1922; etc.
 14. *Visva Bharati Bulletin* (Santiniketan), no. 1, 1919.
 15. 'Akanksha' [ambition], *Shanti Niketan Patrika*, 1919, p. 8–9.
 16. Shikshar Milan [Meeting of the two branches of education] (1921), *Siksha*, op. cit., p. 180–98.
 17. Rabindranath Tagore, *Visva Vidyalyay Roop* [The functions of a university], 1932; *Ashramar Roop O Vikas* [Ashram structure and development], Santiniketan, Visva Bharati, 1941.
 18. Quoted in L. K. Elmhirst (ed.), *Rabindranath Tagore: a Pioneer in Education. Essays and Exchanges between Rabindranath Tagore and L. K. Elmhirst*. London, John Murray, 1962.
 19. Ibid.
 20. *Visva Bharati Bulletin* (Santiniketen), no. 21, 1936.
 21. Sudhir Sen (ed.), *Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction*, Santiniketan, Visva Bharati, 1943.
 22. Kripalani, op. cit., p. 316; also Prabir Kumar Devanath, *Ravi tir the Videshi* [Foreigners in Rabindranath's holy place], Calcutta, Book Home, 1986.
 23. Tagore, *Personality*, op. cit.
 24. Rabindranath Tagore, 'My Educational Mission' in *The Modern Review*, June 1931, p. 621–23.
 25. Manindra Nath Jana, *Education for Life: Tagore and Modern Thinkers*, Calcutta, Firma K.L.M. (Pvt.) Ltd., 1984; Mukherjee, op. cit.; Sunil Chandra Sarkar, *Tagore: Educational Philosophy and Experiment*, Santiniketan, Visva Bharati, 1961. Profiles of Dewey, Fröbel, Montessori, Rousseau and Tolstoy are included in this series of '100 Thinkers on Education'—Ed.
 26. Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* [Song offerings]. English translation in prose by Tagore himself in a book of 103 of his poems published by London, The Indian Society, 1912.

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