



Rabindranath Tagore, a Visionary: His ideas on Education and Rural Reconstruction

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Abstract

It was a period of social upheaval and reforms in India when the mystic Rabindranath Tagore a prominent poet and profound thinker was born in Calcutta on 6 May 1860. He was born into a prominent Calcutta family known for its socio-religious and cultural innovations during the 19th Bengal Renaissance. Rabindranath did not write a central educational treatise, and his ideas must be gleaned through his various writings and educational experiments at Santiniketan. In general, he envisioned an education that was deeply rooted in one's immediate surroundings but connected to the cultures of the wider world. He felt that a curriculum should revolve organically around nature.

Key Word: Rabindranath Tagore, Visionary, Education, Reconstruction.

Introduction: It was a period of social upheaval and reforms in India when the mystic Rabindranath Tagore a prominent poet and profound thinker was born in Calcutta on 6 May 1860. He was born into a prominent Calcutta family known for its socio-religious and cultural innovations during the 19th Bengal Renaissance. The profound social and cultural involvement of his family later played a strong role in the formulation of Rabindranath's educational priorities. Although he was not educated in any university, he was clearly a man of learning with original ideas about education.

Key ideas: Rabindranath did not write a central educational treatise, and his ideas must be gleaned through his various writings and educational experiments at Santiniketan. In general, he envisioned an education that was deeply rooted in one's immediate surroundings but connected to the cultures of the wider world. He felt that a curriculum should revolve organically around nature. He also emphasized upon the importance of an empathetic sense of interconnectedness with the surrounding world he wrote,

*"We have come to this world to accept it, not merely to know it. We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy. The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence. But we find that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but it is severely repressed. From our very childhood habits are formed and knowledge is imparted in such a manner that our life is weaned away from nature and our mind and the world are set in opposition from the beginning of our days. Thus the greatest of educations for which we came prepared is neglected, and we are made to lose our world to find a bagful of information instead. We rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him grammar. His hunger is for the Epic, but he is supplied with chronicles of facts and dates...Child-nature protests against such calamity with all its power of suffering, subdued at last into silence by punishment".(Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality*,1917: 116-17)*

It should be noted that Rabindranath in his own person was a living icon of the type of mutuality and creative exchange that he advocated. His vision of culture was not a static one, but one that advocated new cultural fusions, and he fought for a world where multiple voices were encouraged to interact with one another and to reconcile differences within an overriding commitment to peace and mutual interconnectedness. His generous personality and his striving to break down barriers of all sorts gives us a model for the way multiculturalism can exist within a single human personality, and the type of individual which the educational process should be aspiring towards. Tagore's educational efforts were ground-breaking in many areas. He was one of the first in India to argue for a humane educational system that was in touch with the environment and aimed at overall development of the personality

Tagore's Educational Philosophy

In Tagore's philosophy of education, the aesthetic development of the senses was as important as the intellectual--if not more so--and music, literature, art, dance and drama were

given great prominence in the daily life. Rabindranath writes that in his adolescence, a 'cascade of musical emotion' gushed forth day after day at Jorasanko.

"We felt we would try to test everything, and no achievement seemed impossible, we sang, we acted, we poured ourselves out on every side". (Rabindranath Tagore, My Reminiscences 1917: 141)

Rabindranath Tagore was more than a resounding leading Indian thinker of India in the twentieth century. A prominent figure through his poetic brilliance who belongs to the traditional group of Indian philosophers of education, inspired by the ancient Indian philosophy of education. He bitterly criticized the defects of British philosophy of education and western educational approach in India, for its aim and means were against Indian national interest, and thus presented educational philosophies.

Tagore considered lack of education as the main obstacle in the way of India's progress and at the root of all its problems. According to him, academic learning becomes joyless and purely mechanical if it is looked upon merely as an instrument for getting jobs and for material and financial gains. Academic learning should enable us to understand the situations in which we are placed and to adopt proper attitudes towards them. The aim of education should be to develop and nourish our beliefs, emotions, and imaginations, which enable us to assess, evaluate, and take up appropriate attitudes towards our experience.

Tagore viewed the traditional academic learning as merely a knowledge-factory, a mechanical system producing students with machine-ground knowledge for the purpose of being examined and graded.

Tagore's Principles of Education:

According to Rabindranath Tagore the education provides a sense of one's identity as a total man and to bring education in harmony with life, It is self-realization. He believed that this realization was the goal of education. The prevalent social condition required the process of education that was based on self-realization in order to establish a well-balanced relation with others belonging to different social strata. In order to reach this basic identity of human being, one needs to undertake processes towards this stage of a total man, a process that can only be assisted through education.

Tagore did not find any opposition between thought, life and philosophy. Besides, he believed that every human being is one who has potentialities to progress towards the super human being, the universal soul. Self-education is based on self-realization, which its process is as important as education itself. The more important thing is that the educator must have faith in himself and universal self, underlying his individual soul. According to Tagore's concept of self-education, the educator must follow these principles:

1. Freedom: Tagore believed in complete freedom of any kind – intellectual freedom, satisfaction, decision, heart, knowledge, actions, and worship then only one can turn to self-guidance.

2. Perfection. Perfection implies that the student must try to develop every aspect of his personality, all the abilities and powers he has been endowed by nature. The sole aim of education is development of the child's personality which is possible only when every aspect of the personality is given equal importance.

3. Universality. Universality implies the important aspect of an enduring faith in the universal soul, which exists within him. It is thus important to identify one's own soul with the universal soul. This search is achieved by knowledge, worship and action. Once this realization of the universal soul is achieved, it becomes easier to progress further.

Nature-based Education

Tagore frustrated with the denatured situation of academic learning process and promoted the system on the model of forest solitude or under the open sky. He insists that no mind can grow properly without living in intimate communion with nature. Those situations presents to the learner a situation, which stimulates his imagination and creativity, and combats the boredom of mechanical learning. He also referred to the significance of educating feeling as distinct from educating the senses and the intellect. Indian national educational system should try to discover the characteristics of the truth of its own civilization. The truth is not commercialism, imperialism or nationalism, but rather universalism. Its aim was to develop individual personality by the means of harmonious interaction and union of the spirit with the environment.

Mother-tongue as the Medium of Education:

The use of English in education prevented assimilation of what was taught and made education confined only to urban areas and the upper classes rather than rural areas. Tagore stressed on the unnaturalness of the system of education in India, its lacks of links with the nation and its management, which was in the hands of a foreign government. He argued that to educate 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.

Education as a Means of Peace

Tagore criticized the British educational process as it failed to develop attitudes and the spirit of inquiry. Moreover, it divided Indian people into two classes: those who received British education comprising wealthy, educated, and English speaking class living in cities and towns and those who did not comprising everyone living in the countryside.

Tagore wanted science to be taught along with India's own philosophical and spiritual knowledge at Indian universities. Because science without constraint of self-knowledge 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 among nations and the source of suppression of the weaker by the stronger. That is why both spiritual and scientific knowledge are considered by Tagore as equally important. About the place of religion in education, Tagore said: "*Nature and human spirit wedded together would constitute our temple and selfless good deeds our worship.*"

Tagore's views on education:

"At half past ten, in the morning the factory opens with the ringing of a bell, and then as the teachers start talking, the machines start working. The teachers stop talking at four in the afternoon when the factory closes and the pupils then go home carrying with them a few pages of machine made learning".

This statement made by Rabindranath Tagore almost a century ago finds relevance even today and speaks volumes on the nature of the 'education' that we as 'students' are subjected to the problems plaguing the current educational system are the same as the ones which Rabindranath Tagore observed in his times.

Unity of west and east:

Rabindra Nath Tagore was primarily an educationist rather than a political thinker. His education marked a novel blending of the ideas of the east and the west. The spiritualism of Indian philosophy and progressive outlook of the western people were blended together to give rise to an educational philosophy which marked its distinction in comparison to other educationists of India.

Natural growth in natural circumstance:

Tagore emphasized on 'naturalism' for framing educational model. He envisaged that nature is the best teacher to the pupil. Nature will provide the student with necessary situation to earn knowledge. No pressure should be exerted upon the student to learn anything. It is the nature which will be the guiding force to inculcate the spirit of learning in the mind of a student to pursue the education he likes. It will shape his behavior and character .

Discard book-centred education:

“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 effort”, said Tagore speaking of bookish learning.

For the first time in the arena of education, Tagore established a new mile stone. With boldness and firmness he rejected a book-centred knowledge for students. To him it is not just to confine the mind of boys and girls to text books only. It will kill the natural instincts of a student and make him bookish. It will kill his creative skill. So, students should be freed from the book-centred education and should be given a broader avenue for learning.

Independence to the learner:

Tagore's approach to education was unique in its approach to it. It gave much emphasis to the 'freedom of thought' and imagination .Tagore had championed the cause of freedom. The same he wanted to implement in the field of education. With that object he had opened

Shantiniketan, Sri Niketan and Brahmachari Ashram. Accordingly, he gave free choice to students to develop their interest in any field they like. To him, education should be after the heart of a man. He explained freedom in three-categorized ways i.e freedom of heart, freedom of intellect and freedom of will.

Education imparted in a natural way will lead to the fulfillment of these three freedoms . One may pursue the vocational education or education of an intellect, or education in any branch of the arts or one may observe celibacy.

Adoption of real and practical teaching:

According to Tagore, teaching should be practical and real but not artificial and theoretical. As a naturalist out and out, Tagore laid emphasis on the practicality of education. That will definitely increase the creative skill within a learner. That creativity will bring perfection in the learning process and the student will be a master in his own field but not a slave to mere theoretical knowledge which one delves deep.

Place of fine arts (dance, drama, music, poetry etc):

Tagore attached great importance to the fine arts in his educational curriculum. To him game, dance, music, drama, painting etc should form a part of educational process. Students should take active part in these finer aspects of human life for these are very essential to enrich soul.

In his words “*speaking is for mankind and music for nature speaking is clear and limited by its need; whereas music is mystic and expressive for a romantic eagerness. That is why; speaking creates nearness between man and man, while music helps us to identify ourselves with nature. When the harmonies of sounds are released with our expression then speaking loses much of its limited significance, but on the contrary getting together of the two muses had an all pervading character*”.

Education for rural reconstruction:

Tagore was aware about the rural poverty of our country. So, he wanted to eradicate it through education. The practical training imparted in different crafts to the students will make them skilled artisans in their field. They can remove the poverty of the rural bulk by applying their education helping thereby in the process of rural reconstruction.

Tagore founded a centre for rural reconstruction to which the modern ecological movement owes so much. In the words of Satish Kumar, paying homage to Rabindranath Tagore in his capacity as Editor-in-Chief at *Resurgence*: “*He not only healed the sorrow and suffering*

which he had experienced due to death, depression and disappointment in his own life but he worked too to heal the wounds of injustice and inequality within Indian society”.

Rabindranath Tagore’s Institute for Rural Reconstruction based at Sriniketan was pioneering in its time and the culmination of his long period of endeavour to redeem the neglected Indian village and bridge the gap between the city and the village. He recruited a stellar team of agronomists, rural health workers, and village-level teachers – notably Leonard Elmhirst from England and his own son, Rathindranath Tagore – who initiated many of the more successful elements basic to rural development work. Tagore comments, *“If we could free even one village from the shackles of helplessness & ignorance, an ideal for the whole India would be established. Let a few villages be rebuilt in this way.”*

Without exaggeration Tagore was the father of the rural uplift movement in this country. He had become an ardent advocate of a thorough rehabilitation of rural life at least a generation before the Indian National Congress turned its attention in this direction. In his programme of constructive work Tagore laid greatest stress on the work of rural uplift. Here was, in his view, by far the most promising field for nation- building activities while this was also the field in which the need for patriotic enterprise was the most pressing. If we take the goal of self-reliance as a premise in Tagore’s scheme of rural reconstruction, it would be easier for us to distinguish the Sriniketan endeavour from the nationalist and economic thinking of its day. The Indian National Congress was also concerned about the poverty of late-nineteenth-century rural India, but there was a difference over the remedy. The Permanent Settlement (of land tenure rights favouring zamindars) of 1793 had created a class that had the right to a share in the produce of the land even without taking part in the production. (Uma Das Gupta, 2008).

If the wealth of nature thus enriched his poetic life, the gain from experience in human affairs was no less real to him as a man. He now came in to contact with men on a scale as never before in his life. The realities of rural life imparted a new tenderness to his outlook. Hence forward human touches became broader and deeper in his literary creations. His sensitive mind reacted spontaneously to the sufferings which he saw around him. New chords were touched in his heart, which brought forth new notes sweetened with more human feelings.

In tagore’s view, only one way of protecting the weak, namely, to give them strength. The most effective way of giving strength is, according to him, to impart proper education. In

his “Call of Truth” written in 1921, Tagore refers to his essay on “Swadeshi Samaj”, said that “*Whatever may have been the faults of that analysis*” he wanted to tell his countrymen at that time that “*we have to win our country from our own inertia and our own indifference.*”

Tagore’s projects for the development of rural education:

- **Infusing the Santhali element in schooling:** “*Gurudev Tagore’s approach to education, the ambience of the gurukul system, lack of rigidity in the curriculum, and the emphasis on holistic education made me realize the possibility of there being a lot of room for improvement in the prevailing system of education Santhal children were subjected to.*”
Infusing the Santhali Element in Schooling by Rina Mukherji.
- **Sriniketan:** A new type of school serving the special needs such as healthcare and economic welfare of Santal tribal communities and other neighbouring villages. He have religiously worked for rural reconstruction in the surroundings villages of his Santiniketan school in rural Southern Bengal and the work of rural economic reconstruction was a pioneer endeavour to redeem the neglected village. Bucked up with such noble mission in 1922, he established rural reconstruction institute — Sriniketan within one year of setting up of Visva-Bharti.
- **Viswa-Bharati:** A central University and an institution of national importance “*Visva-Bharati represents India where she has her wealth of mind which is for all. Visva-Bharati acknowledges India’s obligation to offer to others the hospitality of her best culture and India’s right to accept from others their best.*”(Rabindranath Tagore in 1921)
- **Dartington Trust:** An institution established to promote the Arts, Social Justice and Sustainability, founded by Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst; inspired by Rabindranath Tagore who stayed at Dartington Hall during his European tour in 1930.

Tagore's Vision: Rural-Economic Reconstruction:

The need of his economic development was based on creating a market that will bring all the villagers together and he did this through several melas (fairs). Like two of his dearest students Moitri Devi and Suchitra Mitra who later became renowned author & singer respectively, have written about the contribution of melas like Poush Mela, Nandon mela and Sriniketan mela in bringing villages together and connecting them to the rest of the world.

In 'The Modern Review of The History and Ideals of Sriniketan', he states two objectives — *“first to educate the villager in self-reliance and to bring back to the villages; secondly to implement the concept of 'life in its completeness' with 'music and readings and financial independence”*.

A well known song which is sung at the functions of Sriniketan,

*“The sun shines, the rain pours down in showers,
The leaves glisten in the bamboo grove,
The smell of the newly tilled earth fills the air,
Our hands are strong, our hearts glad,
As we toil from morning till night to plough the land.”*

These lines not only show Tagore's sympathy towards the peasants, but his desire to lend dignity to their work and to lighten their burden by introducing joy and music into it. Tagore sought to bridge the gap between city and village through the Sriniketan experiment of combining science and tradition. The traditional handicraft was made more durable by giving the touch of science and these artisans formed a single group to promote their product with the exporters. Modern economist will coin it as 'cartel'.

The goal of self-reliance was the basic premise in Tagore's scheme of rural-economic reconstruction and it was apparently distinguished from the nationalist and economic thinking of those days where he rejected the Nationalist movement on swadeshi and swaraj. *“Rather he chose the path of 'constructive swadeshi' where he wanted to make the villagers economically more independent. His logic was before you abandon foreign goods, you should be eligible enough to make your own goods. And if one analyzes his activities to implement such concept one would realize that he was talking more about today's 'Welfare Economist' rather than following the political movement of those days,”* affirms Nilangan Banerjee.

In exchanges with Einstein, Tagore had commented “*The progress of our soul is like a perfect poem. It has an infinite idea which once realized makes all movements full of meaning of joy.*” Such movements full of meaning and joy he wanted to spread among rural India also and just not limited only to urban India.

Thus in the work which he started first at Silaidaha and Patisar, and later at Sriniketan there was a silent protest against the indifference of his countrymen. During the Swadeshi Movement he had himself sung in one of his famous national songs: “*if nobody answers to thy call walk alone*”. For years through essays and speeches, stories and novels, poems and songs, he had tried to induce his countrymen to undertake positive work.

In another poem written in the same year he said, “*They call you mad. Wait for tomorrow and keep silent*”. In the midst of indifference he silently started the work on a small scale and patiently waited for tomorrow. Such was the vision of a man who saw education as a means to bring about change in society and more importantly revolutionize the individual.

India Today: Contrary to Tagore’s vision:

“*If Tagore were to see the India of today, more than half a century after independence, nothing perhaps would shock him so much as the continued illiteracy of the masses. He would see this as a total betrayal of what the nationalist leaders had promised during the struggle for independence*”. Shashi Tharoor -*India: From Midnight to the Millennium*.

Tagore’s Vision for an Educated India: Tagore’s progressive educational philosophy is largely forgotten today. The experimental models Tagore pioneered in his schools, Santiniketan and Sri Niketan, remain mere experiments. His ideals have not found their way into India’s schools; future generations have returned to rote-memorization as the predominant learning style. Yet Tagore’s vision for education is one that modern India cannot afford to forget. “*To accept the truth of our own age it will be necessary to establish a new education on the basis, not of nationalism, but of a wider relationship of humanity*”. Rabindranath Tagore, *Visva-Bharati*, 1919, pp. 9-10. (Translated by UDG).

These ideas of a new education were founded upon an urge and an instinct to create a new type of humanity whose scientific-technological progress and economic development would grow through dialogue and respect for values.

Many of these issues remain deeply relevant today; Tagore insisted that education is the most important element in the development of a country. He may have been exaggerating the role of education somewhat when he remarked that, *“In my view the imposing tower of misery which today rests on the heart of India has its sole foundation in the absence of education. Caste divisions, religious conflicts, aversion to work, precarious economic conditions - all centre on this single factor”*. But it is not hard to see why he saw the transformative role of education as the central story in the development process.

It was on education rather than on sacrifice that the future of India would depend. The emphasis here was on self-motivation rather than on discipline, and on fostering intellectual curiosity rather than competitive excellence. Tagore realised the need for education in science as well as in literature and the humanities

Central idea of Tagore’s education vision was the nurturing of students’ souls. The emphasis was on “self-motivation rather than on discipline, and on fostering intellectual curiosity rather than competitive excellence.” India’s democracy is in great danger if it fails to take Tagore’s legacy to heart. Only the kind of education that Tagore envisioned can equip our citizens to meet the challenges of our modern, globalized world.

Conclusion:

Although Rabindranath Tagore was not educated in any university, he was clearly a man of learning. He had his own original ideas about education, which led him to establish an educational institution named Vishva Bharati in Shantiniketan with the intention of re-opening the channel of communication between the East and the West. He travelled extensively in different countries of the world, and was a successful mediator between the Eastern and Western cultures. Tagore’s philosophy of education draws its inspiration from ancient Indian [philosophy of education](#).

As one of the earliest educators to think in terms of the global village, Rabindranath Tagore’s educational model has a unique sensitivity and aptness for education within multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural situations, amidst conditions of acknowledged economic discrepancy and political imbalance. Rabindranath to absorb and learn subconsciously at his own pace, giving him a dynamic open model of education, which he later tried to recreate in

his school at Santiniketan. Not surprisingly, he found his outside formal schooling to be inferior and boring and, after a brief exposure to several schools, he refused to attend school.

His experiences at Jorasanko provided him with a lifelong conviction concerning the importance of freedom in education. He also realized in a profound manner the importance of the arts for developing empathy and sensitivity, and the necessity for an intimate relationship with one's cultural and natural environment. He saw education as a vehicle for appreciating the richest aspects of other cultures, while maintaining one's own cultural specificity.

Tagore devoted much of his life to advancing education in India and advocating it everywhere. Nothing absorbed as much of his time as the school in Santiniketan that he established. He was constantly raising money for this unusually progressive co-educational school. In his distinctive view of education, Tagore particularly emphasized the need for gathering knowledge from everywhere in the world, and assessing it only by reasoned scrutiny. Rabindranath Tagore, by his efforts and achievements, is one of a global network of pioneering educators, who have striven to create non-authoritarian learning systems appropriate to their respective surroundings. Tagore did not neglect the lesser aim of life and education, where the focus of colonial system of education was ultimately on employment. His intention was to correct this conception, without ignoring science, technology, and efforts on rural empowerment. For without these, it is impossible to revive the poor condition of people living in rural areas.

Tagore felt that young generation should be aware of their national cultural heritage, grasp its significance for them, and persuaded them to learn cultures from other countries. Tagore emphasised 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. Tagore considered the lack of education to be the main obstacle in the way of India's progress and at the root of all its problems. Conclusively, he did not want education to remain confined to the cities and to particular classes of society. Perhaps the central issues that moved Tagore most are the importance of open-minded reasoning and the celebration of human freedom. This placed him in a somewhat distinct category from some of his great compatriots

Tagore's positive influence is very valuable, his ideal was a synthesis of local village and global university, without dehumanising cities and nations and profit systems in between. Tagore did not give us a new world, he merely provided us a multitude of lenses to view the world. Each lens was crafted with a very specific fabric- the fabric of humanity. And Rabindranath Tagore shall remain relevant to this world for as long as humanity retains its relevance.

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