

## Educational Ideas and Ideals of Rabindranath Tagore

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### Abstract

This paper discusses in detail the various elements and aspects of Tagore's educational philosophy. Tagore was in favour of the fusion of education and tradition on the pattern of the forest school of ancient India in which pupils lived and studied together in close proximity of nature with alternating periods of study and inquiry and of meditation. Santiniketan represents a unique experiment, transplanting the ancient pattern of education in modern days.

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The school children at Santiniketan had their classes under the shadow of big trees instead of wooden benches in a closed room. In open air classes, apart from the use of books, music, playing, and drama were included not merely as a means of relaxation and enjoyment but practices as part of an active community.

In fact, Tagore was against a dull and mechanical system of education. He gave more importance to creativity and practical knowledge rather than logic and theory, and this became his ideal practice throughout his life, as an educator :

He (Tagore) raised the imagination, the aesthetic sense and higher emotions to a position almost equal to that of reason. They, while operating in the spheres of poetry, music and arts, are almost as important means of discovering reality as reason....(Salkar, p.18).

The static education within the classroom causes a divorce between the body and the mind. In pursuance of this educational philosophy Tagore gave ample freedom to the student in his school. A true educationist can never be comfortable with a system of education in which education

means mere black words on white papers, so Mohit Chakrabarti writes:

Education is never equivalent to a series of suggestions, class-notes on selected topics, made easiest, overnight preparation manifestos hurriedly gobbled up and vomitted in answer-scripts that are somehow or other a prized welcome in the forms of degrees, diplomas and certificates is a straight pointer to the bewailing lot of the student-world (Chakrabarti, p.13).

Tagore's educational preoccupation, both in theory and practice, as revealed through his school at Santiniketan, was a reaction against the prevailing educational system which attempted to communicate knowledge without any references to living reality. Tagore emphasised that reading should, as far as possible, be with reference to physical objects. He remarks:

We read our physical science without any reference to physical objects, and so our knowledge of the subject was correspondingly bookish. In fact the time spent on it had been thoroughly wasted; much more so to my mind than if it had been wasted in doing nothing (Tagore, 1966, p.56).

Rabindranath Tagore's educational philosophy sprang directly from the philosophy of life he professed. Tagore made it his life's mission to carry out his educational philosophy through the institutions he established:

We adorned the cage but the parrot within lay starving. ... What was important was not the storage of knowledge gained from books but the ability to use what is learnt, and develops constant curiosity and alertness of mind (qtd. in Salkar, p.19).

A school full of artificiality takes away a child

from his innocent life. Tagore was not happy with the traditional type of Indian schools where everything was under strict rules and the child was not an object of concern. Tagore remarks painfully about this type of Indian schools. He says: "[such a school] forcibly snatches away children from a world full of the mystery of God's own handiwork, full of the suggestiveness of personality" (Tagore, 1945, p.114).

Tagore regarded both nature and society as a strong means of education. He tried to implement this concept through his own educational institutions. The orthodox pattern of education would not relate to our life, society and surroundings. Many educators worked on this aspect of educational philosophy. In his book, Rabindranath Tagore: His Impact on Indian Education, Kalyan R. Salkar writes.

"Tagore was perhaps the first Indian educationalist to appreciate the linkage that should be there between education and society or rather the social commitments of education by close cooperation between the two" (Salkar, p.25).

In this context, Tagore himself asserts, "For, true education is to realise at every stage how our training and knowledge have an organic connection with our surroundings" (qtd. in Salkar, p.25).

Being a humanist, Tagore founded educational principles on his love and honour for human beings. Dr. Sachin Sen notes:

Tagore's ideals of education sprang from his reverence for human personality. Tagore believed in the human approach to educational problems and through education he wanted to bring about a desirable social order (qtd. in Salkar, p.25).

Tagore's opinion on education was not rigid but flexible. He held that education should promote harmony among human beings:

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 existences (Tagore, 1945, p.116).

Love and universalism are the two essential aspects of Tagore's idealistic philosophy. Education to him is an eternal search for fulfilment of these ideals.

Tagore opposed corporal punishment because he believed in the possibility that the students could themselves acquire a sense of self discipline and correct themselves by reasoning and understanding. He did not believe in the discipline which was imposed from outside; he favoured that discipline which comes out from our inner self. He wanted the student to be self-disciplined. To him, "the most desirable thing would be that they (students) would maintain discipline in everything not under any external compulsion but out of their own accord" (qtd. in Gopal, p.166).

Tagore was against the idea of education being something which could be poured into the mind of the child from outside. A proper environment for education, he believed, could be found in the lap of nature. Education, for Tagore, was not a material to be poured into the mind of the child for a continuous growth of his inner self. To clarify this point V.R. Taneja quotes Tagore's own words in his book, *Educational Thought and Practice*: "[Education is] the conscious process of filling but the subconscious process of absorption" (qtd. in Salkar, p.21).

Tagore advocated for wholeness of life and education:

Education is a permanent part of the adventure of life...it is not like a painful hospital treatment for curing them [students] of the congenital malady of their ignorance, but is a function of the health, the natural expression of their minds' vitality (qtd. in Salkar, p.21). Freedom was the keynote of Tagore's educational philosophy, freedom from the domination of men and freedom from the domination of walls. Tagore says that education is worthless when, "divorced from the streams of life and confined within the four walls of the classroom becomes artificial and loses its value" (qtd. in Salkar, p.21).

In one of his articles, Bhupendra Nath Sarkar writes about Tagore's concept of freedom in education:

'Education,' according to him [Tagore], 'has for its object freedom—freedom of intellect, freedom of sympathy, freedom in the material universe through our truthful dealings with her universal laws, freedom in the society through our maintaining of truth and love in all human relationships. ...' (Salkar, p.23).

Learning is more real through activity than through the written word. In Tagore's opinion, dramatic performance should be made a regular subject of education. Children need the opportunity to give expression to their sentiments through perfect and graceful movements of the body. Tagore's scheme of education included dancing and dramatics too. Tagore was aware that the language of sound and movement was more effective in the education of children than the usually spoken language. In this context, it is relevant to refer to Tagore's own words:

However great a scholar may be, if he has not educated his body, he has to live a life of dependence on others and in many ways he is an incomplete man. There is a close and inseparable connection between the faculties of mind and body...Handwork, music and arts are the spontaneous overflow of our deep nature and spiritual significance (qtd. in Salkar, p.22).

Tagore started his educational experiments in the lap of nature and far from Modern Township at Bolpur. In the words of Kalyan R. Salkar:

For him [Tagore] human improvement should come from within. It is this love of the child, the future man, that prompted him to establish his own educational institution, where the child could learn in consonance with his own nature and in reaction with the nature outside; under the constant guidance of teachers and in an environment where there was freedom of mind, freedom of will and freedom of heart (Salkar, p.23-24).

Tagore believed that children should be surrounded with the things of nature that have their own educational value. Their minds should be allowed to stumble on and be surprised at everything that happens before them in their every day life. Tagore, chiefly a naturalist, considers Mother Nature as a real teacher for a child. He draws a contrast between a traditional school teacher and Mother Nature, He says: "The schoolmaster is of the opinion that the best means of educating the child is by concentrating of mind, but mother nature knows that the best way is by dispersion of mind" (qtd. in Salkar, p.74).

Nature, for Tagore, is one of the springs from where perfect and pure knowledge flows freely.

Nature teaches the child the first lessons of freedom and gives him immense delight and enables him to find his own solution to the problems he faces. The development of the child is an inner process. Training of senses in natural surroundings is an essential part of Tagore's education philosophy. In one of his articles, Mohit Chakrabarti highlights Tagore's theory of closeness to nature in education:

All his education is geared to the controlled and loving atmosphere of Nature that signals him to the world of freedom of mind. Being not altogether a disbeliever in the spirit of supernaturalism, Tagore also conforms to this fact to a great extent that 'in our mind alone does Nature live', and as Nature lives within each of us either explicitly or implicitly, it is the responsibility of every individual to do all the good one can, in all the ways one can, at all times one can, with all the zeal one can, in every place one can and to all the souls one can (Chakrabarti, p.23).

According to Tagore, travelling can be a source of knowledge if we prepare ourselves to open our eyes to see the beauty of nature, ears to hear the magic voice of nature. In his article, "Tagore's Teaching Methods," Kalyan R. Salkar throws light on Tagore's ideas of the closeness to nature in educational philosophy:

The best method for Tagore is learning, side by side with travelling, when pupils can get first-hand knowledge. Therefore, schooling should be an eternal picnic. Like Rousseau Tagore advocated that the best learning is possible only through experience and not by cramming books (Salkar, p.74).

Kalyan R. Salkar writes about Tagore's concern for the rural folks of his country in his book, Rabindranath Tagore: His Impact on Indian

Education. Here he shows how deeply Tagore was concerned about villages and villagers:

How are we to set our house in order? "Tagore's answer was two-fold: Bridge the gulf between the cities and villages. Villages are the real reservoirs of our national strength... Villages are the source of our national vitality"(qtd. in Salkar, p.136).

Tagore gave a serious thought to the idea of rural development through education. In Tagore's view, the root cause of India's poverty was the lack of education of the masses. The moment the people were educated they would be conscious of their obligations and try to stand on their legs. Tagore's institute for rural reconstruction at Sriniketan was a concrete step towards rural upliftment through education. He wanted to inculcate in villagers an attitude of self-help, self-respect and self-reliance. He observed:

From the very beginning, such education should be imparted to them (village folks) that they may know well what mass welfare means and may become practically efficient in all respects for earning their livelihood (qtd. in Gopal, p.150).

Tagore was always conscious of rural strength and firmly believed that education was the most effective solution of the problems of rural areas. He felt "that no reform could lighten India's load except the free and intensive and dissemination of learning among the lower classes"(qtd. in Salkar, p.75).

To assimilate nature and freedom in education for all-round development of personality and to gain complete education was the basic purpose of Tagore's educational philosophy. In the course of time, these fundamental principles became the milestone of his educational philosophy.

Tagore was a man of great vision and spiritual wisdom. In the field of education, his object was the emancipation of man from all kinds of bondage. He aimed at perfection, not only of the body or the mind but also of the soul. The objective of the new school was to provide an all-round education for village children, which would not only enable them to earn a decent livelihood, but also equip them with an ability to improve rural life in all its aspects.

There is a close relationship between education and the economic life of people. Realising this fact Tagore gave a vocational orientation to Indian education. This he did by introducing a variety of crafts in Sriniketan. And he did it long before Gandhi could conceive of his scheme of basic education.

In his article, "Contribution to Education", Kalyan R. Salkar quoted K. R. Kripalani's praise of Tagore's educational institutions: "If Tagore had done nothing else, what he did at Santiniketan and Sriniketan would be sufficient to rank him as one of India's greatest nation builders"(Salkar, p.140).

In his school at Santiniketan Tagore never taught anything but languages and literature. While talking of language, he always preferred the mother tongue to English as the medium of instruction. He believed that it was through the mother tongue that a child could learn in a much easier way.

The teaching is more easily and naturally communicated through the child's mother-tongue than through an alien medium. Tagore therefore focused on the mother-tongue as a medium of instruction and education. He argued:

... It was because we were taught in our language that our minds quickened.

Learning should as far as possible follow the process of eating. When the taste begins from the first bite, the stomach is awakened to its function before it is loaded, so that its digestive juices get full play. Nothing like this happens, however, when the Bengali boy is taught in English. The first bite bids fair to wrench loose both rows of teeth—like a veritable earthquake in the mouth!(Tagore 1966, p.58-59).

Tagore concludes that no education can be said to be fruitful unless it is associated with our everyday life. Education given through an alien language in the artificial surroundings is a useless exercise. It "...may be compared to rainfall in a spot that is a long way from our roots. Not enough moisture seeps through the intervening barrier of earth to quench our thirst"(Tagore 1961, p.45).

The teacher occupies an important place in Tagore's educational philosophy. He is, above all, an essential resource of educational system. Education, for Tagore, was like a spark of knowledge resulting from the interaction between the students and the teacher. The teacher, in Tagore's view, should be like an eternally burning flame emanating light and knowledge. Tagore defines an ideal teacher in his essay "An Eastern University.":

...a teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself. A lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to burn its own flame. The teacher who has come to the end of his subject, who has no living traffic with his knowledge, but merely repeats his lessons to his students, can only load their minds; he can not quicken them. Truth not only must inform but inspire (qtd. in Das, p.556).

The enjoyment of nature in all its aspects is not less necessary than benches and blackboards, books and examinations. True education must develop the intellect as well as the emotions. There should be a harmony between education and nature and also a balanced approach among various subjects. Such an education can only be imparted when there is a close communion between the teacher and the student which is possible if they share a common root and food and spend most of their time together.

Tagore believed in an emotional attachment between the pupil and the teacher. His school Santiniketan practically demonstrated this belief, as Vivek Bhattacharya describes:

There must be a cordial relation between the teacher and the taught. Without love and sympathy a man cannot be a good teacher. This was the secret of Rabindranath's great success as an educator. ... It must be known to all that in Santiniketan the relation between a student and a teacher is most informal. Some teachers are addressed as 'uncle', some as 'brother'(Bhattacharya, p.142).

In one of his articles, Rabindranath Tagore describes an ideal school in the following terms:

If we had to build a school that would serve as a model, we should see that it was situated in a quiet spot far from the crowded city, and had the natural advantages of open sky, fields, trees and the like. It should be a retreat where teachers and students would live dedicated to learning. ... When they [students] are not engaged in study, the students should work in the garden, loosening the soil around the roots of trees, watering plants and training hedges (Tagore 1961, p.75). Tagore appealed to the teachers and the organizers of new schools for making the

school such a place where children can have all-round development and gain the true meaning of knowledge:

Education in ancient India was in the charge of gurus who were moral and spiritual preceptors, and of teachers who were men rather than machines. ...any new school founded by us should fulfil the following conditions: that their courses are both lively and varied, and nourish the heart as well as the intellect; that no disunity or discord disrupts the minds of our young; and that education does not become something unreal, heavy and abstract with which the pupils are concerned only for those few hours when they are at school (Tagore 1961, p.68-69).

According to Tagore, religion is one of the prominent factors which give proper shape to the personality of a learner. One of the important requirements of education is discipline, and it can be developed and maintained through religion. For Tagore, religious education was not a matter of compulsion, but it was desirable for it built a way for the learner where he could choose the path of freedom. Tagore did not believe in teaching religion to children through set lessons at school. According to him, true religion was not merely to know any set of historical facts but to feel the reality of God. He thought that children would learn of God naturally, if only they lived with people who loved and worshipped Him and with all those beautiful things with which God has endowed this world.

It was Tagore's belief that the time of quiet meditation was in itself good not only for the body but also for the mind and spirit, and that the beauty of the surroundings would by itself and without any effort help the pupil's mind

grow during the hour of meditation. The whole school would gather together for a common prayer in which people of every religion could join.

Tagore held that an appropriate environment must be created for value based education and spiritual oneness. His opinion on religious teaching is revealed through the following words: Religious teaching, likewise, cannot be left to a school committee to be put on their syllabus along with arithmetic and Euclid. No school inspector will be able to measure its progress. No examiner's blue pencil can assign it proper marks. An appropriate environment must be created in which religion may have its natural growth (Tagore 1964, p.311).

And further he says:

It was in the Āsrama where the harvest of religious thoughts, reaped in a great period of Indian History, was garnered in the Upanishads. These had nothing to do with any institution; they never harbored any creeds, nor built rigid walls round them of logical consistency; and therefore people, brought up in the atmosphere of some sectarian religion, consider the texts contained in them merely as so many seeds of religious philosophy (Tagore 1964, p.319).

Tagore strongly recommended the introduction of science curriculum in the school. He welcomed the budding surge of the scientific thought in the country and exhorted his countrymen to accept it. He realised that science and technology would lead to an increase in production for the progress of the country. He appealed: "Indian youth must receive it with alertness the gifts of science and technology" (qtd. in Salkar, p.20).

Tagore emphasised the value of science in his



educational philosophy. In his essay, "Ideals of Education," he underlines the role and meaning of science in the child's intellectual development:

Education in all its different forms and channels has its ultimate purpose in the evolving of a luminous sphere of human mind from the nebula that has been rushing round ages to find in itself an eternal centre of unity. ... Science means intellectual probity in our dealings with the material world (Tagore 1964, p.285).

However, Tagore's acceptance of science was not altogether unqualified. He refused to accept science at the cost of moral values. As he says:

That we should borrow science from the West is right, we have a great thing to accept from the people of the West, –their treasure of the intellect which is immense and whose superiority we must acknowledge. But it would be a great degradation on our part if we forget our own moral wealth of wisdom, which is of far greater value than a system that produces endless materials and physical power that is always on the war-path (qtd. in Mani, p.135).

Tagore was of the view that in an educational institution it was more important to give freedom to children in their activity rather than teach them the national and international issues. In one of his articles, Bhupendra Nath Sarkar describes an incident related to Tagore and Mr. Pearson's open-air class at Santiniketan:

"This open-air class work," says he [Tagore], "has its great advantages, for it keeps the minds of the boys fresh in their appreciation of Nature. I remember in the middle of one class I was suddenly

interrupted in my teaching by one of the boys calling my attention to the song of a bird in the branches overhead. We stopped the teaching and listened till the bird has finished. It was spring-time, and the boy who had called my attention to the song said to me, 'I don't know, but somehow I can't explain what I feel when I hear the bird singing.' I should not enlighten him, but I am quite sure that my class learnt more from that bird than it had ever done from my teaching and some thing that they would never forget in life. For myself my ears were opened, and for several days I was conscious of the songs of birds as I had never been before. This reminds me of an American teacher who allowed his pupil to play on a violin when the latter did not like doing sums of Algebra" (qtd. in Sarkar, p.17).

Tagore emphasised quality education. He was not in favour of merely increasing the number of students at his institution. He rather contemplated nobler aims and purpose of education which, he hoped, would lead to quality education:

It has never been our purpose merely to confer upon our students' degrees and diplomas, to stamp them with pass marks. Not being a mechanist, it has never been my desire to perpetuate in this place machinery for turning out under hydraulic pressure standardized bales of humanity. I have no enthusiasm for activities devoid of the principle of life for all that does not serve the wholeness of our personality. I am not concerned to increase the number of students, my hope has been so to enrich the life of this place that those who come here



may imbibe the creative urge of an ideal, and carry it into their work outside, that in our Asrama the spirit of world humanity may be manifest (qtd. in Chakrabarti, p.29-30).

Mohit Chakrabarti elucidates Tagore's ultimate aim of education:

The introduction of awakening of aesthetic sensibilities in education enables us to understand and experience the deeper meaning of humanity and, for this, no theory or dogma is necessary. Rather it is the mode of living that would sufficiently indicate and ascertain as to what extent we have achieved the goal of refinement and enrichment of personality (Chakrabarti, p.32).

He adds:

... A major breakthrough in his [Tagore's] approach to education for children is, therefore, to remove passivity and foster self-involvement in every activity. That every child must mould his own creative and aesthetic sensibilities in his own unique fashion has been given the topmost priority in Tagore's experiments on education. Let the child discover the nuances and the softer feeling within him. Let him ponder over the marvels of beauty. Let joy, love, hatred, passion and all other feelings within him and encountered by him be re-oriented, re-designed, re-built and re-manifested in an altogether different manner (Chakrabarti, p.38).

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