

**TAGOREAN PHILOSOPHY : AN APPROACH TO ENSURE HOLISTIC
EDUCATION IN PRESENT SCENARIO**

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ABSTRACT

The paper proposes to focus on Tagore's philosophy on education an idea of extending equal right of education for all. The objective of the paper is to analyze the educational thoughts of Tagore, his basic conception of education and its process. The method used is historic-analytic method.

I would like to specially commemorate the thoughts of Rabindranath Tagore, the philosopher who has made much contribution in education in the present educational system. The learners' spirit in the learning process can be developed, from the teaching methodology of Rabindranath Tagore, as he had introduced in Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan. In the classroom pattern of teaching, the philosopher's thoughts are extremely relevant for the puzzled, stressed and burdened learners. The role of freedom in education in an atmosphere devoid of fear is vital. It develops the child's inherent natural beauty. When technology is developing rapidly, changing our life styles, we need to balance it with concepts to encourage the imagination in children in which love and liberty are essential. The changing environmental condition calls for an innovative educational system; a new methodology, which will not only cater to the child's basic career, based formal training but that encourages hobbies, creativity and art, enriching survival.

Keywords : [*Education, Holistic development, Tapovan , Lok siksha, Shilaida , Visva Bharati, Siksha satra*]

TAGORE'S EDUCATIONAL MISSION

It might be surprising to learn that a Literature-Nobel-laureate dedicated forty years of his life to establishing and running educational institutions. Rabindranath Tagore's educational endeavors were motivated by postcolonial ideas of liberation, as he saw education as key to give respect and self-reliance, and therefore to move beyond political, social and economical suppression, which he tried to address since his time in "Shelaidah".

His ideas were also influenced by his childhood experiences that led him to describe schools as prisons. After dropping out of school by 15, the intellectual, artistic, and extremely progressive and liberal atmosphere at home revealed to him how much joy and freedom learning could and should encompass.

Tagore also referred to the "Tapovans" (old Indian forest colonies), where students lived a simple life close to nature and with an inspiring guru. Yet the most important motivation for Tagore's educational engagement is artistic: In his educational endeavors, he created a poem not with words but through action and ideas that aspire to express his "inner truth" or philosophy.

The Learning Child: Freedom to learn unconsciously

Tagore recognizes that children have to be seen in their own rights, so that their strengths become visible and can develop – for example their curiosity and wonder, their imagination and creative joy and their ability to see unity that derives from their freedom from habits of thought and behavior .

Tagore argues that the difference between children and adults requires different methods of learning. While adults may read books and while their learning is motivated by a clear purpose, children require indefiniteness and learn mostly unconsciously:

“Our purpose wants to occupy all the mind’s attention for itself, obstructing the full view of most of the things around us . The child, because it has no conscious object of life beyond living, can see all things around it, can hear every sound with a perfect freedom of attention, not having to exercise choice in the collection of information.”

For Tagore, this kind of learning and approach to the world is the best way for children to grow. He terms it the “**method of nature**.” Through this “method,” children learn even something as complicated as their first language quicker, better, and more joyfully than adults would be able to do, using their focused methods.

According to the “**method of nature**,” guessing and trying out are preferable to explaining; unconscious learning and sudden surprises are preferable to focused effort; and experiencing and discovering the world first hand is preferable to books. Tagore argues that learning by the “**method of nature**” will allow children to develop their creativity and to apply what they have learnt. Tagore uses an analogy to warn educators of the detrimental effects of applying the adult method of learning to children:

“It is like forcing upon the flower the mission of the fruit. The flower has to wait for its chances. It has to keep its heart open to the sunlight and to the breeze, to wait its opportunity for some insect to come seeking honey. The flower lives in a world of surprises, but the fruit must close its heart in order to ripen its seed. It must take a different course altogether. For the flower the chance coming of an insect is a great event, but for the fruit its intrusion means an injury.”

To allow the “**method of nature**” to work, children need freedom. This includes a certain degree of “naughtiness,” which is an expression of children’s curiosity and their growth, and which Tagore not only accepts but even desires. Not having enough freedom and being harshly disciplined and punished, argues Tagore, can have devastating and demoralizing effects on children.

Punishment, for Tagore, is only acceptable, if it is imposed by nature or by oneself. He is convinced that this method is most successful and that he has managed to improve the behaviour of unruly children through the “method of nature” and his “freedom cure.”

Tagore thinks that children’s freedom should allow them to determine what they want to do for a large part of their time. He criticizes most adults for structuring children’s time and activities so much that they have no space to develop their lives and selves individually, to find their own voices, and to express themselves creatively.

The Ideal School:

A Boarding School in Nature

Tagore is convinced that an ideal school should be amidst nature. In Santiniketan, lessons take place mostly outside in the shade of trees. For schools in less warm climates, he recommends spending at least one school day completely outside, not counting sports, games, and excursions. He also believes that boarding schools are most advantageous, as they can be far away from cities and therefore permit children to move about more freely.

They also allow for more simplicity and for protection from the overburdening stimuli of the modern world (such as too much entertainment, ready-made products, and luxury) and from their parents’ narrow aspirations. Tagore cherishes self-chosen simplicity – without idealizing poverty! – because he thinks that an excess of material goods can restrict the direct experience of the world, inflate the self, and hamper true maturation.

By protecting children from their parents' narrow aspirations, Tagore means that parents should be careful not to confer their own desires for the material and purposeful to their children and their much simpler needs; either through molycoddling or through modelling and pushing them towards their own worldly aspirations of turning them into mere "moneymakers." He emphasizes how important it is for children to experience nature through their bodies – without having windows, chairs, or shoes in the way –, and to develop creativity and responsibility when they are lacking ready-made products and instruments. He argues: "The real king is he who is able to create his own kingdom."

Self-discipline and Self-government

Tagore's criticism of punishment and his allowance for freedom is countered by his emphasis on discipline. Particularly in the first years of his Santiniketan school (initially called Brahmacharyashram), he focused on simplicity and discipline. Yet Tagore believed that it is crucial to inspire children to be self-disciplined, because "cruel slavery, in which to drill the child mind is demoralizing perfect obedience at the cost of individual responsibility and initiative of mind."

He was convinced that students' respectfulness grows when they are free and treated with patience, sympathy, and respect themselves. Tagore encouraged his students to think critically and to voice their opinions.

Tagore's students were helping to shape the daily life of the ashram and thereby make the ashram rules their own. He believed that only when students take part in creating their school, it can be their nest, instead of remain a mere cage. The ability and enthusiasm to create one's own world was one of Tagore's main educational goals.

Tagore was the first to introduce the experiment of student's self-government in India (i.e. swaraj). This included a system of self-punishment, according to which a student court will discuss whether a student is guilty and will then himself determine his punishment.

Ideal Teachers: Gurus vs. Schoolmasters

Tagore found it difficult to find the right teachers for his schools. He was looking for Gurus instead of Schoolmasters. The Sanskrit term guru means teacher, yet emphasizes spiritual knowledge and practices and is connected to the ancient tradition of "Brahmacharyashrams" and "Tapovans". According to Tagore, gurus are "active in the efforts to achieve the fullness of humanity" and will give their whole selves to their students instead of merely sharing the material as prescribed by the curriculum.

Being a guru is a true calling instead of a job to earn money, and the motivation for it consists in love for children and for the subject, not in love for power. Good teachers, wrote Tagore, activate children's minds instead of helping them to assimilate and collect information, and inspire children through their own self-development. They encourage them to work on the teacher's own original projects and thereby travel together on their journey to more understanding.

"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."

Tagore argues that teachers would be strengthened through a higher status that, in India, might come through the title "guru." He also argues that teacher's education needed to improve, and that it should include a thorough understanding of children's psychology. Their teaching would furthermore be of higher value if teachers were given more freedom regarding their teaching methods and, to a certain degree, regarding the content of what they teach.

In general, Tagore is convinced that education “is not a matter of ‘teaching’, of methodology or of ‘educational equipment’” but depends on the personality of the teacher and the relationship to the student. He said to one of the teachers at his school:

“Do not be preoccupied with method. Leave your instincts to guide you to life. Children differ from one another. One must learn to know them, to navigate among them as one navigates among reefs. To explore the geography of their minds, a mysterious instinct, sympathetic to life, is the best of all guides.”

For his university, Tagore also tried to find lecturers that express the qualities of a guru and who “are wholeheartedly and with all their energy engaged in the processes of research, invention and creation.” Tagore taught many lessons himself with great success and has been addressed by Gandhi and others as **Gurudev** (godly teacher).

HOLISTIC EDUCATION: KNOWLEDGE, ACTION, LOVE

Language, context and books

In contrast to colonial educational institutions, teachers in Santiniketan used the mother tongue and related the content to the historical, cultural and natural context to ensure that students properly understand the content and can apply it.

Tagore believed that neither books nor teachers should simplify information but should rather stretch their young readers’ abilities. Through this, they would encourage critical thinking, imagination and continuous work of the unconscious with what has been read or learnt.

In history lessons, Tagore encouraged the focus to be on ideals instead of knowledge, as he believed that this would help the learners’ personality to grow. Furthermore, students should learn from the known to the unknown and develop applied “**knowing**” rather than learn abstract “**knowledge**.” Following the “**method of nature**,” they should explore and examine and educate themselves through independent work.

Activities: From Scientific Experiments to Social Engagement

Over the years, Tagore’s curriculum was more and more determined by activities. This included scientific experiments, excursions for social research, trying to find solutions to the villagers’ real-life-problems and implementing them, picnics, tending to animals, and helping around the school buildings. The **Brati-Balakas** and **Brati-Balikas** (“boys and girls who have taken an oath”) tended to the surrounding villages.

Tagore most thoroughly actualized this activity curriculum in his **Siksha-Satra** school, where all subjects are organized around practical problems and the improvement of living conditions. But even his university aimed to be not only the centre of India’s intellectual life but also its economical life.

Students worked on farms and in crafts, cooperated with villagers and helped them to improve their farming methods. Through their activities, they not only improved rural life but also learnt better, developed their personality and grew spiritually, for example by developing an emotional relationship with nature.

Arts: The pride and joy of Santiniketan

The arts – fine arts, dance, music, theatre – have a place of honour at Tagore’s educational institutions, and his university is famous for its various arts departments. Tagore focused on arts in education as they help to develop and express aesthetic awareness, creative expression and joy and build the necessary foundation for a mature and well-rounded personality. He even argued that the arts are as crucial for human vitality as health and food

He introduced formal lessons only to those who felt inclined to take them. Tagore also wrote plays that he performed together with the children and their teachers. Tagore included arts as part of all subjects by inciting

them to creatively express what they have learnt, which supported the learning process and furthered creative expression and imagination. At the university, students of non-artistic subjects were encouraged to take up arts lessons as minor subjects.

Furthermore, Tagore supported the students in founding a literary club and illustrated journals and showing their work in festivals and exhibitions. Students were also asked to take up handiworks or crafts, such as gardening, woodwork, or weaving. Tagore believed in the pedagogical value of these classes as well as in their value for economical independence and as being an end in itself through the aesthetic expression they provide.

EDUCATION OF THE SOUL: LOVE AND JOY

Not only the mind and the body were part of Tagore's comprehensive education, but also the soul. According to Tagore's philosophy, love is the most important path to reaching full humanity, because it connects us with the world and therefore expands our consciousness from the ego to the soul. This produces joy (**ananda**), which Tagore often used synonymously with love. Tagore often used the Sanskrit term *bhakti* when he talked about love, but also the Buddhist term *maitri*, which means "universal sympathy, which is intellectual as well as emotional.

Tagore proclaimed that the main reason why he can teach children, without having any qualifications, was that he knew how to make them happy. His aspiration was to fill his students' hearts with joy and love. He recognized that emotions, and particularly joy, are a precondition for successful learning – not only because they make learning less strenuous, but also because they enable the learner not only to know but to properly assimilate information. Tagore's education for love and sympathy included love to God and humanity (**ethical and spiritual education**), love to others (**peace education**) and love to nature (**environmental education**). We will now look into all these areas in more detail.

SPIRITUALITY AND ETHICS

Education for social empathy and values are usually considered to be the task of ethical education; yet for Tagore they are spiritual education. According to him, one needs to be connected to a higher reality and be free from one's limited ego to acquire and develop ideals and values. Tagore is convinced that we cannot support children's ethical development through mere teaching or preaching, e.g. religious education, as he does not believe in a fixed moral code or ideals that could be passed on.

He argues that values cannot be directly taught and that this is only possible to do with sectarian dogma or tradition. Direct passing on of "value" might therefore only lead to piety but never to spiritual and proper ethical development. Instead, spiritual development requires widening one's consciousness, filling it with love and truly comprehending the world. This very often happens only through intense moments of enlightenment and inspiration, and it demands patience.

INTERNATIONALISM: EDUCATION FOR PEACE

Tagore deeply cared about the international political situation of his days and spoke out for the unity of humanity in an age of nationalism. To implement true internationalism, Tagore believed that children should be deeply rooted in their own culture but at the same time realize their unity with all of humanity.

Tagore invited students and teachers from many countries to his school and university and thus created a multicultural and multi religious community that enabled its members to get to know each other on a daily basis and to develop love and respect. He was convinced that hospitality is the best pedagogical method to educate for peace. Foreigners are not a problem as in other places, but are invited as guests that everybody tries to care for.

His idea was to create an “**atmosphere of love**” that remains in his students’ hearts and frees them from racist prejudices.

ECOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Tagore considered being close to nature as crucial, as he is convinced that the communion with nature gives energy, generates love, and puts life into perspective. He saw nature as indispensable for the healthy growth of children’s body and soul. A child, he argued, has an inborn desire for nature:

Tagore therefore did not only let children spent their time outside during school lessons and their free time, but also celebrated the seasons with them and incorporated literature, plays and music that praised nature, into the daily life of the campus life.[84] Through this, he hoped to facilitate spiritual identification with nature, which in turn, according to Tagore, is the basis of environmental education and the protection of nature.

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND PROJECTS BY TAGORE

SHILADA

In the 1890s, Tagore was put in charge of the family’s rural properties in East Bengal. His first experiments in adult education were carried out there, as he gradually became aware of the acute material and cultural poverty that permeated the villages, as well as the great divide between the uneducated rural areas and the city elites. His experiences made him determined to do something about rural uplift, and later at Santiniketan, students and teachers were involved with literacy training and social work and the promotion of cooperative schemes.

SANTINIKETAN

After teaching his children at home for a while with the help of tutors, Tagore decided to found a school at Santiniketan in 1901. The land belonged to his father, and his nephew Balendranath Tagore had briefly opened a school in this place, which was closed again in 1899. Tagore’s school was first called Brahmacharyashram (brahmacharya translates as “movement towards brahman”).

From 1908, the institution accepted girls as students and became a co-educational place of learning. Tagore travels and contacts with educationists of other countries were influential particularly around 1912/13 and made his school more democratic. From 1925 this school came to be known as Patha-Bhavana.

SRINIKETAN & ADULT EDUCATION

In 1912, Tagore bought a house with a lot of land (Surul) that later becomes famous with the new name “Sriniketan” (“Place of Wellbeing”). He sent his son Rathindranath there, who was trained in agriculture in America, to improve village life. Yet an outbreak of malaria stopped the program which only regained new life when the American Leonard Knight Elmhirst (1893-1974) and his later wife and millionaire Dorothy Staight Whitney began to support it in 1921.

In 1923, Sriniketan became the Institute for Rural Reconstruction. The institute’s focus was on laboratory research directed to improve productivity, yet included health, social life, and education as crucial aspects of Sriniketan. Furthermore, co-operatives in banking, groceries and handicrafts were established to improve village life.

VISVA-BHARATI

Tagore’s 1918 article “The Centre of Indian Culture” presents his plan for a university as a centre in direct connection with Indian life, that establishes first a connection with all of Asian and then opens to the whole world. Tagore founded such a university in the same year, and inaugurated it officially in 1922. Its name

“Visva-Bharati” expresses the connection between India and the world, and its motto yatra visvam bhavati ekanidam means “Where the whole world meets in one nest.”

Visva Bharati became particularly famous for its artistic institutes, particularly Kala-Bhavana (fine arts) and Sangeet-Bhavana (singing). In 1951, Visva-Bharati (including Sriniketan) became a state university under control of the central government, which leads to financial security but a lot less autonomy.

SIKSHA-SATRA

In 1924, Tagore, Elmhirst and teacher Santosh Majumdar initiated a particularly successful educational experiment: a school called Siksha-Satra (meaning: “where education is given free of cost”). This school was first located in Santiniketan and later in Sriniketan, and was aimed at poor village children. According to Tagore,

“Siksha-Satra is the natural outcome of some years of educational experiment at Santiniketan and at the Institute of Rural Reconstruction at Sriniketan. Here an attempt is being made to give an all-round education to village children and provide them with training which will not only enable them to earn a decent livelihood but also to equip them with the necessary training and creative imagination with which they help to improve the rural life of Bengal in all its aspects.”

JOROSANKO-SCHOOL

Hardly any literature discusses Tagore’s later educational experiment at Jorasanko. After Gandhi had visited (and criticized) Santiniketan, Tagore became more conscious of what he himself saw as its shortcomings. He founded a new “model school” in Jorasanko, his family home, to overcome established routines. He himself taught, and arts and music were the most important subjects of the school.

Tagore’s school and university exist until today. Many aspects of his institutions have changed. But pupils still have their classes under trees, Tagore’s festivals are celebrated, and music and the arts form a crucial part of the life of the students.

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