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Kumkum Bhattacharya

Rabindranath Tagore

Adventure of Ideas and Innovative Practices in Education

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To

RKB

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My husband, to whom this book is dedicated, went through the manuscript literally with a tooth and comb with infinite patience and perseverance. The shortcomings of the book are only mine. However, it has been inspirational for the opportunity to work on Rabindranath Tagore.

Contents

Abbreviations

EWRT1	*The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 1
EWRT2	*The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 2
EWRT3	*The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 3
EWRT4	*The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 4
RB	Rabindra Bhavana Archives, Visva-Bharati
RNT	Rabindranath Tagore
RR	*Rabindra Rachanavali* or Collected Works of Rabindranath Tagore
VBQ	*The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*

Chapter 1
Introduction

Abstract Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) spanned almost two halves of two centuries that stood as witness to change in India and the world on an unprecedented scale in almost all spheres of life was himself an architect of that change. He believed that the principal means of effective and sustained change would come through education, and therefore, it was important to think seriously and deeply about its nature and form. This chapter explores the forces that drove a world-renowned poet and also a prolific artist in his later life to take up the art and craft of education for more than half his life. Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913, the first Asian to be so honoured. We need to situate Tagore's ideas in the light of the colonial rule. The core of Tagore's educational ideas was built around the need for **self-determination**; **strengthening the nation** from the grass roots; the '**universal man**'; need for **sensitivity** to the aspirations, struggles and distress of his countrymen; and the need to **resolve** conflicts between the old (traditions) and the new (modern). The other core idea centred round his conviction that the beginning of education was best in **mother tongue** or the vernacular. His approach to education was both knowledge generation and dispensation. He was keenly aware of the need for appropriate and surplus reading material for students that he provided through his many writings. This chapter provides glimpses into the different phases of Tagore's educational thoughts and their translation into institutions as well as the various practical measures that he adopted in order to sustain them.

Keywords Alternative education • Self-determination • Mother tongue and education • Universal man

> I am an artist and not a man of science and therefore, my institution necessarily has assumed the aspect of a work of art and not that of a pedagogical laboratory.[1]

[1] Rabindranath Tagore (Henceforth RNT), My Educational Mission, *Modern Review*, June 1931.

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I

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) spanned almost two halves of two centuries that stood as witness to change in India and the world on an unprecedented scale in almost all spheres of life. Tagore notwithstanding in his own words being '…a poet first and a poet last…'[2] was one of the key figures of the extent as well as in shaping of that change in India. He believed that the principal means of effective and sustained change would come through education, and therefore, it was important to think seriously and deeply about its nature and form. He showed interest in education from very early stage in his life, and he had strong conviction that education changed society. Undoubtedly, education allows for access to the ocean of knowledge to those who partake of it and thus sets in motion the channels by which universal aims and objectives are realized and through which societies become progressive. Individuals learn to question social norms, religious compulsions, economic and political structures.[3] Also, education forms bridges or links between people, reducing the divide between the literate and illiterate when the literate come to be of service to society at large. There is a need to build educational systems and institutions that are rooted in such values that will allow greater mass participation sans caste or creed. '…in the present age with its facility of communication…the great federation of men…a unity, wider in range, deeper in sentiment, stronger in power than ever before'[4] can make for true education. Tagore clearly did not mean the prevalent tradition of religious teaching in India in the context of his educational ideals.

Ever since the award of the Nobel Prize to Tagore for literature in 1913, Tagore perforce became known throughout the world as the first Asian to have been so honoured. How was Rabindranath Tagore or Tagore, as he came to be called, placed in the Western world and how was the Western world generally perceived? That the Western world was emerging as economically powerful and advanced in terms of knowledge was an established fact. 'From the early decades of the nineteenth century, an informed awareness of the west became an overpowering presence in the consciousness of educated Indians. …There was a fairly universal recognition that the west was now dominant….An attitude to knowledge, fundamentally different from the one informing Indian civilization, was the key factor in the triumph of the west'.[5] Tagore witnessed World War I and the beginning of World War II. Internationally, he came to be regarded as a messenger of peace and calm, a sage. Gandhi named him the Great Sentinel,[6] the conscience of the nation. Tagore's Nobel

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[2] RNT, An address on his 71st birthday, *Pravasi*, 1931.

[3] Anisuzzaman, 'Ihajagatika', *Ihajagatika O Ananya*, 2012, p. 19.

[4] RNT An Eastern University, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 2 (henceforth EWRT2), pp. 556–569.

[5] Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Perceptions, Emotions, Sensibilities: Essays on Indian's Colonial and Post-colonial Experiences*, 1999, p. 5.

[6] M. K. Gandhi in his essay, A Great Sentinel, *Young India*, 13 October, 1921, 'I regard the poet as a sentinel warning us against the approach of enemies called Bigotry, Lethargy, Intolerance, Ignorance, Inertia and other members of that brood'.

Prize-winning collection of poems, *Gitanjali* or the Song Offerings (1913, London, Macmillan) had been cited as a universal message of fortitude, solace and wisdom to the individual in troubled times. 'It is a pleasure merely to sit beside him, he reposes the mind and the body. Speaks very little but looks beneficent and intelligent…'[7] 'He *is* like a saint…[and] made me feel that we in the west hardly know what real gentleness and tenderness are….I can now imagine a powerful and gentle Christ, which I never could before'.[8] 'It was impossible for me to say anything to you about your poems *last night* because they are of a kind not easily spoken about. …You have put into English which is absolutely transparent in its perfection things it is despaired of ever seeing written in English at all or in any Western language'.[9]

'Who were Tagore's contemporaries in world literature? Some of those who were born like him in the 1860s were the Belgian poet-dramatist Maurice Maeterlinck (b. 1862), the English author Rudyard Kipling (b. 1865), the Irish poet W.B. Yeats (b. 1865), the French novelist and essayist Romain Rolland (b. 1865), the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (b. 1866), British playwright John Galsworthy (b. 1867), the French author Andre Gide (b. 1869). … With most of them Tagore had formed a relationship of mutual admiration'.[10] Romain Rolland expressed his deep appreciation and admiration of Tagore and his ideas.

Of Tagore's poetry and literature, there have been spells of stirrings in the whole world because of the Nobel Prize in 1913 and as already mentioned, he being the first Asian to be awarded the prestigious prize for literature.[11] However, of his work in his life's mission in defining the aims of education that he propagated and the institutions that he founded, there was a lack of interest, awareness or discussion in academia or by educationists and intellectuals in his time. Other than his writings on education, a significant body of his writings in philosophy too had not excited much attention or engagement with. In this context, it could be recalled that he delivered the prestigious Hibbert lectures at Oxford (1930) that was published later as the *Religion of Man* (1931). At the time of the lectures, it was reported that 'no series of the Hibbert lecture has aroused more public interest than the present one'.[12]

L. K. Elmhirst and his wife Dorothy Straight set up Dartington Hall in England loosely modelled on the idea of Visva-Bharati, Tagore's university, and there were references to Tagorean ideas of education in Patrick Geddes and his

[7] Undated letter from Thomas Sturge Moore, English poet, cited in Mary Lago (ed.), *Imperfect Encounter: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore 1911–1941,* 1972, pp. 18–19.

[8] Ibid, p. 19. Letter of 15 July 1912 written by Frances Cornford to Rothenstein; she was Charles Darwin's granddaughter and wife of Cambridge classical scholar Francis Cornford.

[9] Letter from Mary Sinclair, 8 July 1912; quoted in Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, 1981, pp. 102–103. Mary Sinclair (1863–1946) was a novelist and philosopher leaning towards feminism, idealism, psychoanalysis and psychical research. There has been renewed interest in her work by feminist thinkers during the 1970s.

[10] Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation*, 2011, pp. 235–236.

[11] Bikash Chakravarty, *Poets to a Poet: 1912–1940*, 1998, 2001. See also Martin Kaempchen, *Rabindranath Tagore and Germany: A Documentation*, 1991.

[12] *Manchester Guardian*, (19, 21, and 26 May 1930), EWRT3, p. 970.

institution in Montpellier, France. We might care to explore Tagore's impact on some of the Eastern and Asian countries of the world that he visited like Japan, China, Indonesia, Thailand, Russia, and the west-Asian countries like Persia and Iraq. The Indo-Japanese association established in Tokyo still maintains links with Visva-Bharati through various programmes. About responses to Tagore within the subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka), the bag is extremely mixed and is discussed in the last chapter (Conclusion—Home and the World).

Tagore started a school for boys in 1901 in a rural area of West Bengal, India, where his father Devendranath had bought a fairly big piece of land for the purpose of meditation and prayer. Devendranath named this place Santiniketan (abode of peace). It was here that Tagore got his father's permission to start the school. In 1918, when the boys' school that became co-educational in 1909 had been functioning for 18 years that Tagore conceived of a university, Visva-Bharati. This university was one of its kind, and it was formed in 1918 but formally inaugurated on 23 December 1921. The school formed the nucleus of the university; the two institutions were symbiotically connected.[13] However, long before he started his school, he engaged with the problems and conditions of education and rural uplift at an intellectual and practical level and started small attempts at creating ways of educating people and ameliorating their conditions.

What urged a poet who later emerged also as an artist to engage himself so seriously with both the art and task of education? Tagore was often asked this question, and his replies on various occasions provided us with insights into his thoughts and ideas. He chose his words according to his audience. To an audience of school students in Tokyo, he conspiratorially confessed how he '[when thirteen] finished going to school'[14]; or how he heeded the cry of the young, 'Comrade Poet, where are you hiding yourself? Come to us. …We are suffering at the hands of the school-master, come and rescue us'.[15] Besides these, there were reasoned arguments supporting his ideas of education in his countless letters, essays and books and these could help us trace how he had confronted the prevalent systems of education and constructed his alternative approach and in many instances his unique approaches. Yes, in the true spirit of the path breaker of hitherto uncharted terrain, Rabindranath did not confine his ideas to a narrow spectrum of an 'ideal'; he allowed his personal experiences and understanding; his imagination and his own growth as an individual; his changing attitudes to give *shape*, *substance*,

[13] Visva-Bharati is unique for the reason that in the near history of the country there are no instances of such a symbiotic growth of a school and university. Even today there are few instances of such institutions. Incidentally, in the Buddhist Viharas we find boys (and sometimes girls in separate monasteries) entering as neophytes at a young age and spending long years or staying on for a lifetime for the purpose of study and meditation.

[14] RNT, 'My School', *Modern Review* May 1925, EWRT4, p. 518.

[15] RNT, 'To the Child', An address given at The Kyoto High School for Girls, 1925, EWRT4, op. cit. p. 524.

intention and *direction* to his ideas and their manifestations. Tagore did not rest by just propounding a scheme and theory; he tried to give shape to his ideas in concrete terms.

Let us try to identify the core ideas of Tagore and explore whether there were some radical departures from convention in his practices of education. The core ideas were built around the ideas of the need for **self-determination**; **strengthening the nation** from the bottom; the '**universal man**'; need for **sensitivity** to the aspirations, struggles and distress of his countrymen; and the need to **resolve** conflicts between the old (traditions) and the new (modern). The other core idea centred round his conviction that the beginning of education was best in **mother tongue** or the vernacular. Some of these core ideas were being voiced by a few thinkers and reformers like Vidyasagar and Devendranath Tagore even before Rabindranath's birth. There was also a rising discontent with the rule of the alien power in the country and hence a dislike for English as a medium of instruction. Tagore's active and almost passionate championing of the vernacular medium in education throughout his life from a relatively young age was a departure from the prevalent practices of his times when English teaching was gaining ground.

In Tagore's creation of his own institutions is an indication of the value he ascribed to self-determination; the establishment of his institutions is an instance of this. 'I repeat our education is the thing which we should first take into our own hands'.[16] Tagore believed that self-determination would lead to strengthening of the nation from below. Tagore had long rejected the idea of nationalism and had embraced the idea of the universal man; he believed that human problems are interlinked and their solutions too are to be worked out in cooperation and fellow feeling. In Tagore's work on rural welfare, he displayed his deep sensitivity to the rural people and their aspirations. When Tagore embarked on his own institutions, he boldly introduced radical measures in student discipline and routine school management through democratic student participation and responsibility. This was indeed a radical departure as students were usually seen as passive receptors. Another departure or rather innovation in his institutions was creating a body of texts for students filling a void not only of text books but also of books for general reading; for this, he himself wrote many books and persuaded his colleagues to embark upon book-writing on various topics in an interesting and engaging way. The books were in the vernacular, thereby filling a long-felt vacuum. Thus, we see a two-dimensional approach to education—knowledge generation and dispensation in ways that would hold the attention of the students and draw them towards learning. Tagore entered a different phase with his ideas of the complete or universal man when he shifted from his initial ideas of the ideal educational institutions being secluded from civilizational life of cities or isolated from the world, i.e. he moved away from the idea of the tapovana.

In the early years of the school, called Brahmacharyashram, comensality was governed by caste distinction as also was the system of greeting a teacher by the

[16] RNT, 'The Way to get it done' cited in Uma Dasgupta, *Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism*, 2009, p. 320.

students—a high-caste student could abstain from touching the feet (traditional Hindu greeting of a senior in age as a sign of obeisance) of the low-caste teacher. These practices were soon given up, and modern values were fostered. There was enough evidence of his changing views of women's education, their independence and roles, changes that were radically different from his earlier notions.[17] However, in his literary works right from the beginning, there was evidence of a deep sympathy for women characters and their condition of social suppression.[18] Later on, when he started his Sriniketan work of Rural Reconstruction, he gave special attention to the health and nutrition needs of women, their need to be independent and their participation in community life. His conception of the goals of education went through a process of evolution in response to his own personal growth.[19] Rabindranath did not disown his earlier ideas even when they were in sharp contrast to his present ones; rather, he explained the reasons why he had changed course. He had once remarked in jest how 'inconsistency' was both his greatest virtue and greatest vice![20]

II

From a historical perspective of the colonial past, Rabindranath's place in the hall of fame of educationists is assured. His ideas had stimulated academicians and educationists, and there were some institutions that developed along the path that he had showed.[21] The present series on 'Key thinkers in world education' signals the demand for innovative ideas guiding us on paths of educational excellence and progress in order to make the world a better place. Rabindranath amply fulfils the conditions of innovation and ingenuity, and this is evident in his still active institutions. We have the testimony of this in his vast body of writings, observations, letters as well as the reports and descriptions of the many visitors, alumni and

[17] Cf. RNT, 'Stri Siksha', *Siksha*, *Rabindra Rachanavali* (henceforth RR), Volume 6, p. 286. Tagore makes a subtle distinction between two branches of education—one being of knowledge in which there should be no distinction between men and women while in the second branch, application of knowledge, there will be natural distinctions between men and women.

[18] RNT's short stories like The Wife's Letter (tr. Supriya Chaudhuri) in *The Essential Tagore*, Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty (eds.), 2011, pp. 567–580; RNT's novels like *A Farewell Song* (tr. Radha Chakravarty), 2011,; *Gora* (tr. Radha Chakravorty), 2009; *Relationships Jogajog*, (tr. Supriya Chaudhuri), 2006. There is a vast body of literary creations about women and their condition in different genres of songs, poems, essays and letters.

[19] For more details on this see H. B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, 2nd edition, 2007, pp 14–16.

[20] Anisuzzaman, 2012, 'Nana Rabindranather Mala', op. cit. p. 236; Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, 2008, p. 191.

[21] Deeply influenced by Tagore, L. K. Elmhirst and his wife Dorothy Straight set up Dartington Hall in Devonshire, UK; Patrick Geddes established his institution in Montpellier, France. There are some recent (post-independence) examples of schools in India inspired and influenced by Tagore's ideas—in these schools children study in the lap of nature following many of the Tagorean principles.

teachers who have been associated with the institutions that he built and managed over a time span of nearly forty years (1901–1941) till his death.[22] We also have some seminal works of scholars and educationists on Tagores' ideas and philosophy of education.[23]

The history of his institutions during his lifetime is not an unbroken chain of events, policies, philosophy or even manpower. Rather one could rightly remark that the institutions, at first the school and then the University in continuation of the school, grew and evolved in spurts and bursts. The story of the changes as well as the responses to these changes is also worth noting. In talking of the changes in Visva-Bharati in particular and Santiniketan in general, there is a range of perceptions—'altered beyond recognition' to 'never really taking off as an academic institution'[24] and the not-to-be-ignored opinion that 'there is a strain of continuity'[25]—this is also a story of interest and could be a lesson.

The historicity of Tagore's educational ideas and the sociocultural forces at play in his personal socialization provide us the tools by which we can integrate his ideas and practices into coherent and interrelated/intersecting sets within the universe of international humanism. Tagore thought of international humanism to be a very significant ideal of education. The story of education since the British colonized India first as a merchant company and then bringing the country directly under the British crown was as overshadowed by the proclamation of Macaulay's minutes on education in 1835[26] as also by the various indigenous endeavours to bring modern education to the masses by luminaries like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Dayanand, Swami Sraddhananda, Annie Besant, Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita, Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. In fact, of

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[22] Amartya Sen remarks, 'I am personally rather partial to seeing Tagore as an educationist having been educated myself at Santiniketan. There was something totally remarkable about the ease with which discussions in the school could move from the traditional Indian literature to contemporary as well as classical western thought, to China, Japan and elsewhere'. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (eds.), 1997, *Selected letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. xxiv.

[23] H. B. Mukherjee, op.cit.; Kathleen M. O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet as Educator*, 2011; Bratin Chattopadhyay, *On Edcuation and Rabindranath*, 2000; Bratin Chattopadhyay, *Sikshar Nirman: Prasanga Rabindranath*, 2012; Asoke Bhattacharya, *Education for the People: Concepts of Grundtvig, Tagore, Gandhi and Freire*, 2010.

[24] Indira Gandhi (1917–1984), former Prime Minister of India was a student in Visva-Bharati as a 16 year old. In an interview to Uma Das Gupta, 'My Santiniketan Days, in conversation with Indira Gandhi', *Hindol*, Year 3, No. I, 2011, Tagore 150th Birth Anniversary Special Issue, pp. 110–115, Indira Gandhi remarked that she was in agreement with Stella Kramrisch, the noted Austrian art critic, art historian and visiting faculty in Visva-Bharati (1923) that 'Visva-Bharati never really took off as a University but that it was a way of life'.

[25] My own personal experience of teaching in Visva-Bharati for almost 34 years and the opinion of the many old-timers who are still alive forms the basis of this observation. The underlying criticism is that we are only carrying on with dead rituals as the inmates of the university are indifferent and inured to innovation.

[26] *Source* http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/Macaulay001.html for the text of the minutes on education drawn up by T. B. Macaulay, 1835.

many of the above luminaries and their ideas, Rabindranath's ideas appear to possess demonstratively more enduring qualities characterized by the facility to adapt to change. The attaining of Indian nationhood in 1947 was the most significant game-changer, and since its creation as a Central University by the Act of Parliament in 1951, Visva-Bharati is here to stay though not in exact terms as envisioned by the founder but in the way moulded by the state and compulsions of time.[27]

III

One of the most important and significant contributions of Tagore to education, was the conception of an international university that would '…create opportunities for revealing different peoples to one another… [in] some meeting ground [of] the university. …I have formed the nucleus of an international university, as one of the best means of promoting mutual understanding between the East and the West'.[28] Such an institution was indeed unique; the primary goal of which was '… an opportunity for working together by sharing humanity's common intellectual and artistic heritage'.[29] In a letter to Nepal Chandra Ray, a fellow teacher in the University, Tagore wrote, 'Visva-Bharati [that grew out of the nucleus of a school] will not be a mere school; it will be a pilgrimage. Let those coming to it say, oh what a relief it is to be away from narrow domestic walls and to behold the universe'.[30] We could here recall Tagore's oft-repeated poem: 'Where the mind is without fear'.

> Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
> Where knowledge is free;
> Where the world has not been broken up into narrow fragments by narrow domestic walls;
> Where words come out from the depth 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 habit;
> Where the mind is led forward to thee into ever-widening thought and action—
> Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.[31]

India had her first modern universities under British rule in 1857—the first three universities within the presidencies of Calcutta (now Kolkata), Madras (Chennai) and Bombay (Mumbai), all three metropolitan cities. The universities

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[27] Kumkum Bhattacharya, 'An Old Banyan Treee', Ira Pande (ed.) *Beyond Degrees: Finding Success in Higher Education*, 2008, pp. 202–207.

[28] RNT, 'An Eastern University', EWRT2, op. cit. p. 557.

[29] Uma Das Gupta, 'Rabindranath's Experiments with Education, Community and Nation at his Santiniketan Institutions', Sanjukta Das Gupta and Chinmoy Guha (eds.) *Tagore—At Home in the World*, 2013, p. 281.

[30] RNT's letter 3rd November 1918; Rabindra Bhavana, Serial No. 395. It may be noted that Visva-Bharati was yet to be formally inaugurated but in Tagore's mind the university was a reality.

[31] RNT, poem no. 35, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*, 2010, p. 43.

till about 1920 were not teaching universities; they organized examinations and publication of results for the students studying in various affiliated colleges. These three institutions of education were under the patronage and administration of the British Crown. In 1904, Lord Curzon passed the Indian Universities Act by which the government assumed almost total control over education. There was some protest at this; the feeling that the responsibility of education should be taken up by the people of India themselves and not the British gained some currency.[32] We would have to see Tagore's endeavour and initiative against the backdrop of a conglomeration of factors set in motion by colonial policies, systems and content of education. Tagore single-handedly and without the least promise of support from any corner forged his own path armed with the courage of conviction in his ideas. He founded not only an alternate school but also a unique university 'Indian in origin but international in intent—a meeting point of a multitude of cultures pursuing the path of truth and knowledge'.[33]

Educational ideas are expected to take shape in structures and forms, and these are to be assessed periodically on the quality and scope of knowledge generated, extent of their impact on students as well as gauge whether these structures and forms possess the powers of self-generation and self-renewal. These will be the core issues of this monograph.

IV

This monograph has been divided into six chapters (including Introduction). After a general introduction, the historical and social–cultural influences on Tagore have been described, and the forces that urged Tagore to engage with issues of education have been discussed. Tagore's work in the field of education had three distinct phases that have been elaborated upon in three chapters, Tagore's corpus of writings and accounts of practices being the principal guide in the preparation of this monograph.

In the first phase, Tagore confronted the realities of rural Bengal while being relegated the duties of the landlord by his father. The exigencies of his stay in rural Bengal also gave him the necessary push to think about his own wife and children away from the protecting umbrella of his ancestral home and the patriarch, his father who seemed to have had the capacity to take anyone's burden on his shoulders. It was when Tagore was 32 he wrote the seminal essay, 'Sikshar Herpher' or 'The Discrepancies in Education' in 1892.[34] In an earlier collection of writings,

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[32] For details on the Indian Universities Act and the consequent protests see Anisuzzaman, 'Jatiya Siksha Andolan O Rabindranath', Anisuzzaman (ed.) *Sardhosatabarshe Rabindranath: Bangladesher Sradhhanjali*, 2012, pp. 501–517. See also Report of the Sadler commission, 1832; http://www.kkhsou.in/main/education/calcutta_university.html.

[33] RNT, 'An Eastern University', *Creative Unity*, EWRT2, op. cit. p. 560.

[34] RNT The essay Sikshar Herpher or Discrepancies in Education, was first read at a public meeting at Rajshahi, now in Bangladesh, and later published in *Sadhana*, a monthly journal in 1892 included in RR Volume 6, pp. 565–572. Among the various translations of the title, the one used here is attributed to Kathleen M. O'Connell op. cit. pp. 123–124.

Letters from a sojourner in Europe, Tagore championed the cause of women's education, and he observed how free women in European society seemed to be. He also admired the show of friendship between husband and wife in European society. Of course, we must read England in place of Europe as most of the letters were observations on English society.

This phase could also be called the transforming phase—giving body and shape to ideas and establishing an institution in which a new kind of education could be provided. The system did not merely symbolize talking back to the Raj but was much more than a revolt; it was a movement. This was the phase when the school was established in Santiniketan following his trial of home tutoring of his children in Selidaha where he was with his family, looking after the family estates. The school in Santiniketan went through its own processes of change over a period of almost twenty years after which Tagore entered his second phase.

The formation of Visva-Bharati as the centre for Indian culture, referred to as an Eastern University with an international approach to knowledge, formed the second phase. This was the most complex phase of all with many dilemmas and conflicts that Tagore experienced and expressed through his writings. If we simply put together his writings on education, we would arrive at a number that exceeds 100 if not more. However, there were many repetitions and elaborations on similar themes in the writings and letters of this phase mainly because he gave many public lectures often on the same topic in various parts of the world and the country (India). Simultaneously, he was raising funds for his new university and trying to convince intellectuals of the day to contribute of their knowledge to the institution. Also, Tagore and his institutions were too much in the public gaze—in some ways, Tagore himself invited this visibility, but it meant lending ears and responding to all 'concerned well-wishers'!

The work of Rural Reconstruction, the third phase has been dealt with in a separate chapter—this work occupied the poet as long as his ideas on education did; complete education for the poet entailed educated individuals extending themselves to the uplift of their surrounding environment. Visva-Bharati situated in Santiniketan since its inception spreads to another campus in Sriniketan in 1921, some 3 km distance where Tagore in 1912 had purchased a big mansion-like building (known as Surul Kuthi Bari) and some surrounding land. Santiniketan and Sriniketan became twin campuses of the university. The former or Santiniketan was the seat of learning in all its streams, and the latter or Sriniketan was the centre that had a two-way traffic in knowledge generation and knowledge application and extension. The principal aim of Sriniketan was to bridge the created gulf between the educated and the rest of society so that rural societies that were largely formally uneducated could revitalize themselves along the needs of the times. Along with his work of Rural Reconstruction, Rabindranath conceived of a plan for mass education under the aegis of the Public Education Society or Loka Siksha Samsad formed in Visva-Bharati in 1937, for those adults who were literate and interested in knowledge/learning but were unable to attend university/college. This could be described as a precursor to distance education. Special text books were prescribed and commissioned, examinations were arranged in various

centres and those taking such courses could appear for the examination and upon successful qualification presented with certificates stating the level and the course they had undertaken.[35] The subjects were limited to understanding of Indian culture, social history and geography, some topics of science, religion, etc. Some of the texts were prepared under the series *Loka Siksha Granthamala* and *Visva-Vidya Sangrahalaya*.

Rabindranath set up in 1923 the University's publication unit in Kolkata (Calcutta) with its own sales counter; this was called *Granthana Vibhaga*. There was already a press in Santiniketan for the regular journals like the *Visva-Bharati News*; *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*; *Visva-Bharati Patrika* (in Bengali and later on, there was also the Hindi journal of the same name); *Visva-Bharati Bulletin* and the *Annual Reports* of the University. Besides, the Publication Unit in Kolkata was for Tagore's own writings and the writings that he commissioned scholars to write. In 1923, he went to some lengths to retrieve his copyright from a firm in Allahabad (Indian Press)[36] and invested the same for Visva-Bharati. Since then and till the lapse of copyright (2001), Visva-Bharati had monopoly rights over all of Tagore's Bengali writings, and this was indeed a sound business proposition. Most university presses find academic writings and profit do not go together—Tagore found the unique solution by subsidizing the academic writings by ploughing back the money earned through his creative works.

From the 1920s, Tagore gradually moved away from the ideas of a nationalistic model of university to internationalism, a way of thinking that had not yet gained much currency. From the idea of the village being the cradle of civilization,[37] he went on to conceive of how civilizations in order to thrive and grow need to share knowledge and wisdom in an atmosphere of mutual respect where knowledge was not seen as power to control others but flowing from all directions without distinction.

In the concluding chapter, an attempt has been made to integrate the chapters to be able to arrive at the 'final product' and to assess that 'final product' in the context of the present. As we plough through the vast literature that Tagore has left behind, it becomes clear that he thought deeply and passionately about education—its nature, its spread and its uses. He championed the cause of mass education but not at the cost of quality. Rabindranath worked tirelessly to give shape to his ideas—he wrote textbooks for various levels; commissioned the writing of texts by other scholars; composed songs, plays, dance–dramas for the students to participate in and be part of the creative process; took classes starting from the very young to the advanced levels; personally attended to guests and visitors to the campus; and guided the work of extension activities in rural areas adjacent to the campus. He was not just a man of letters; he tried to live up to his words and dreams. Such is his legacy.

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[35] For details see H. B. Mukherjee, op.cit. pp. 225–228.

[36] For details see *Panchasatbarsha Parikrama: Granthana Vibhaga*, Kanai Samanta (ed.) 1974.

[37] See H. B. Mukherjee, op. cit. p. 301.

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Chapter 2
The Emerging Picture: A Social-Historical Perspective and Significant Personalities

Abstract This chapter gives us insight into how Rabindranath became one of the few world figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The historical understanding of the Tagore family and the movements it was associated with over 100 years is very crucial in the emergence of the Tagore phenomenon. The process of colonization of a huge country and the subsequent change in power and administration from a merchant company to the British crown ushered in change on an unprecedented scale in every sphere of life. It was as if tradition was forced to confront modernity and this was felt very deeply in the sphere of education. The history of the Indian renaissance closely enmeshed in the various measures of the spread of education was experienced more sharply in Bengal, the then capital of the British Raj. Many luminaries were active in bringing about the fruits of modern education to the people of who the Tagores were front runners. Tagore's personal experiences of modern education convinced him of the need to think anew about what should be the nature of education. His own path to education had been through his intense relationship with nature, creativity and joy; of his exposure to various cultures and societies and the freedom, he enjoyed in expressing his ideas and experiences through his writings. Tagore spent some years in rural Bengal from which he gained insight into the condition of the peasantry and the life of the poor villagers and this opened for him another dimension in his educational endeavours.

Keywords History and the Tagores • Colonial forces and education • Indian renaissance • Rural life and education

> We enjoyed the freedom of the outcaste. We had to build our own world with our own thoughts and energy of mind… I was born in a family which had to live its own life, which led me from my young days to seek guidance for my own self-expression in my own inner standard of judgement.[1]

[1] Rabindranath Tagore (henceforth RNT), cited in Anthony Xoares (ed.) *Rabindranath Tagore: Lectures and Addresses*, 1988, pp. 4–5.

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2.1 Bengal Navajagaran: The Renaissance and the Tagores

All of us are products of our times—most of us are carried on time's shoulders while a few carry time on theirs. Tagore would be counted among those few. Very seldom in human history has come a moment when we find successive generations of one family line straddling the pre- and post-epochs of change—undoubtedly, the Tagores were one of those illustrious examples. Tagore was born on 7 May 1861 in the Tagore ancestral home situated in Jorasanko in Kolkata. This ancestral home became a fountainhead of culture—expressed through enterprise, innovation, talent, interests and who 'employed their influence and wealth for the good of society and cultural enrichment'.[2] Tagore was born to Devendranath Tagore and his wife Sarada Devi; he was the fourteenth child of the fifteen children born to this couple; the last son died soon after birth and thus Tagore from a young age was the youngest in the family. The Tagores maintained a joint-family system; Jorasanko Thakur Bari was a bustling household of countless kin and servants, accounts of which regale us in his autobiographies.[3]

In the fifteenth century, the Tagores were ostracized as Pirali Brahmins (Brahmins who had lost their caste because of association with the Muslims) and who on shifting their base from the then East Bengal to Calcutta flourished through their business links with the East India Company. It was as if ostracism gave the family the necessary impetus to carve out their own path. Rabindranath has remarked, 'Long before my birth our family had cast off the anchor of society and had reached a distant mooring'.[4]

The Tagores were educated; they were patrons of culture and because of their enterprising efforts, became wealthy and prominent and were counted among the first families of the newly emerging metropolitan city of Calcutta that was the capital of British India till late nineteenth century. It was the time of the British Orientalist Policy (1772–1830),[5] and the Asiatic Society was established in 1784 of which Tagore's grandfather, Dwarakanath Tagore, became the first Indian member and patron. Important works under the aegis of the Asiatic Society in archaeology, indology, philology, history and ethnography by British Orientalists marked a shift from Persian to English influence in language, administration, education and social ways. During the early days of the East India Company, Persian was the official language of administration under Mughal influence.[6] The training college for civil servants was established in 1800. These and many more institutions could be regarded as ushers of the Bengal Renaissance or *Navajagaran*. The missionaries under the leadership of William Carey introduced in 1800 the printing press

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[2] William Radice, *Selected Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*, 1985, p. 19.

[3] RNT, *My Reminiscences*, tr. Surendranath Tagore, 2008b, and RNT, *Boyhood Days*, tr. Radha Chakravarty, 2007.

[4] RNT, 'Atmaparichay', *Bichitra,* 1961, p. 310.

[5] See Kathleen M. O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet as Educator*, p. 28.

[6] Ibid.

and brought out ancient Bengali and Sanskrit texts; this in some ways obviated the dominant power of English language; the Bible was translated into Bengali. This revival of the vernacular over the increasing popularity of English gave an impetus for a rethinking of the Hindu traditions and in the process rekindled the name and work of the illustrious Rammohun Roy (1774–1833) as one of the pioneers in the fields of religious and social reforms in the late eighteenth century. His vast education in most of the world religions, his ability in many languages, his clear and analytic mind made him one of the most powerful religious and social reformers.[7] He had found support from the Tagore family especially from Dwarkanath Tagore, and both Devendranath (Tagore's father) and Rabindranath Tagore admitted their lifelong indebtedness to the influence of Rammohun Roy. The Tagores carried the legacy of Rammohun forward. Tagore wrote, 'Raja Rammohun Roy inaugurated the modern age in India…. In social usage, in politics, in the realm of religion, and art, we had entered the zone of uncreative habit, of decadent tradition, and ceased to exercise our humanity. In this dark gloom of India's degeneration Rammohun rose up, a luminous star in the firmament of India's history, with prophetic purity of vision, and unconquerable heroism of soul. He shed radiance all over the land; he rescued us from the penury of self-oblivion. …He is the great path maker of this century…'[8]

It was into that era of great change when the changes were being coalesced that Tagore was born into a family that was among the front runners. C.F. Andrews wrote, 'In Bengal it was the shock of the Western civilization that startled the East into new life and helped forward the wonderful rebirth. Then, there followed the revival of the Sanskrit Classics and a reformation from within of the old religions. These two forces, acting together, made the Bengal Renaissance a living power in Asia. In Bengal itself the literary and artistic movement came into greater prominence. Rabindranath Tagore has been its crown'.[9] The accounts of the atmosphere in the Tagore household provided us the variegated flavours, tastes and smells that had touched Tagore imbuing him with genius. 'The great advantage that I enjoyed in my younger days was the literary and artistic atmosphere that pervaded our house…. Pandits of the deepest learning would visit father's drawing room to discuss the scriptures and the sciences; musicians would display their skill. Such people made of our house a living university'.[10]

Tagore's eldest brother Dwijendranath was a philosopher, mathematician and poet. He spent most of his life in his literary and academic work; his second

[7] See Saumendranath Tagore, *Raja Ram Mohan Roy*, 1966 for biographical details.

[8] RNT, 'Rammohun' (1933), in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 3 (henceforth EWRT3), pp. 667–669.

[9] Reverend Charles Freer Andrews was a lifelong compatriot of both Tagore and Gandhi who gave his services to Visva-Bharati and to Gandhi's freedom struggle. He brought Tagore and Gandhi together having known Gandhi during his days in South Africa. The extract is from his 'Letters from Abroad', collected as *Letters to a Friend* (1928), EWRT3, op. cit. pp. 219–221.

[10] Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, 2nd Edition, 1948, p. 20.

brother, Satyendranath became the first Indian civil service officer and was a Sanskrit scholar. His wife, Jnadanandini,[11] was a progressive woman, who broke many social rules and conventions governing women's behaviour; travelled with her husband to England, she could play the piano and ride horses. The modern way of draping a sari with the accompaniments of blouse and petticoat was attributed to her. Hemendranath, the third brother of Tagore, was incharge of the education of the young in the Tagore household—Tagore was principally educated by home tutors and his brothers. It went to the credit of Hemendranath that he ensured that Rabindranath and the other youngsters under his care were taught in their mother tongue, Bengali, in some defiance of the prevalent customs and practices. English as a subject was also taught to the children. 'Hemendranath had the farsight and courage to give primacy to the cultivation of the mother tongue in his scheme of children's education against all opposition and current fashion'.[12]

Jyotirindranath, Tagore's fifth brother, was a good musician and had many hobbies and interests and a very good literary taste—it was with the encouragement and appreciation of this brother and his wife, Kadambari, that Tagore explored his poetic and musical talent from a very early age. Kadambari had a deep interest in and appreciation of Bengali literature. It may be mentioned that the women who entered the Tagore household as brides came at a very young age as was the custom then; Jnadanandini, Kadambari and even Tagore's wife, Mrinalini, came as prepubescent girls who were transformed into talented and cultured women. Clearly the 'situation made the man'! 'When I had a few birthdays behind me, Jyotirindranath took me in hand. Though he was a good 12 years older than me, he never looked down on me as a child. He was always at the piano absorbed in composing tunes ever new. The task of quickly fitting words to these improvisations was left to me. Without his encouragement, who knows whether I should ever have blossomed into a songwriter? The stream of song that he set free in me will remain my life's companion to my last hour'.[13]

Rabindranath's third sister, Swarnakumari, was a pioneer Bengali novelist and musician. Rabindranath's cousin, Ganendranath, was also very talented; he was a dramatist and musician and kept the whole household alive and stimulated with his dramatic productions. Ganendranath's father was an amateur scientist devoted to experiments in Chemistry. The two sons of Ganendranath's brother and Gunendranath were responsible for the movement in fine art that is called the Bengal School—they were Gaganendranath and Abanindranath. The legacy of staging plays, meanwhile, continued with most members of the household participating in them including the women and this was also a first in the society of those times. Rabindranath took this legacy to greater heights when he established his institutions and travelled to many places with his plays and dance-dramas in order to spread the message of his institutions in which girls and women played pivotal roles.

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[11] The pronunciation of Jnadanandini is Gyanadanandini; Jnan or Gyan means knowledge.

[12] H. B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, 2013, p. 10.

[13] RNT, *My Reminiscences*, op. cit. p. 34.

2.2 Colonial Educational Scene

What were the prevalent systems of education when Rabindranath was a child? In 1835, the Macaulay's minutes on education were adopted by which the 'social, cultural and political upliftment of India was to be made possible along Western lines. This policy was supported by both Rammohun Roy and Dwarakanath Tagore, who used their influence towards the allotment of government funds for schools providing English education'.[14] Macaulay's words are of some interest; '…it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population'.[15] However, this plan succeeded only in pushing the case of English or Western education while the other greater plan for development of the vernaculars as noted in the minutes did not take off. Between 1844 and 1846, under the leadership of Devendranath, a vernacular journal (*Tattvabodhini Patrika*) and a vernacular school for teaching theology and science were started; a few textbooks were composed; however, due to financial difficulties, the school was closed. There were quite a number of journals and magazines in Bengali that started to be published in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Among other agents of change, the printing press was a prime liberator and catalyst of change. It was as if the expression and experience of the many were provided a means of communication; the publications became mediums of conveying information, generating information and debate—a template in which the only parameter was the urge to communicate and thereby participate in issues larger than the individual. The English dailies were perceived as the voice of the colonizer while the vernacular press enjoyed the confidence and trust of the people. Also, what was important was the fact that from a largely oral culture there was a transformation to a written one—certainly an impetus to learn the letters, if nothing else more of education. Education on a larger scale was the demand of the times for which neither the traditional systems nor the colonial provisions were enough.

The continuity of Western education and English as the medium of instruction was reaffirmed in 1854, and it was under this dispensation that the universities in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay were set up (they were not really teaching universities, they became so much later[16]); it was decided to increase vernacular schools

[14] Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit. p. 47.

[15] *Source* http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/Macaulay001.htm for the text of the minutes on education drawn up by T.B. Macaulay, 1835.

[16] See Report of the Sadler Commission, 1832, http://www.kkhsou.in/main/education/calcutta_university.html.

for elementary education and promote girls' education.[17] In 1857, the governance of India passed to the British Crown and the trend of English education was on the rise. Resistance to British rule was growing and there was a rising nationalistic feeling. This was felt strongly in the area of education. However, when Tagore was old enough to go to school, that he would be sent to a modern school where he would learn English among other subjects, was foregone.

There are very few and uncertain records of the state of the indigenous education that existed in the early days of colonization in India. In a survey of the indigenous schools in Bihar and Bengal in the years 1835, 1836 and 1838, William Adam reported the presence of a meagre number, but more importantly, he gave a definition of indigenous schools. He identified indigenous schools as only those institutions organized and established by the indigenous people and not supported by religious or charitable bodies. He obviously did not include the Islamic 'schools' such as the *maktab* and the *madrasah* or schools established by Christian missionaries. He further noted the kind of curriculum followed in the indigenous schools, a modicum of the three R's, as that of the primary level. The report mentioned that there were no caste distinctions in such schools, they being open to anyone who came.[18] However, there was no connection between this and higher education that seemed restricted to the higher castes and the well off.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the reforms initiated and given shape by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) were significant and important. He could be described as a true successor to Rammohun in forging his own path to what he believed would achieve education for the masses. He worked within the vernacular structure, writing new texts on grammar, prose, and translations[19] that would be understood by many who had had no grounding in Sanskrit. Sanskrit was never a language of communication; rather, it was the language of intellectual discourse in literature, philosophy, religion, etc. Vidyasagar set up vernacular schools and a teacher training centre. Vidyasagar and his colleagues prepared the texts for the various subjects that formed the course—English, Greek and Indian literature, history and culture, arithmetic, astronomy, philosophy and biology. This was certainly modern education. Vidyasagar championed the cause of girls' education and between 1857 and 1858 there were as many as 40 schools for girls. However, the government did not continue with the grant given to Vidyasagar therefore he could not continue to run the schools. In another part of the country, we find Dayanand

[17] For more details see Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit. pp. 51–54.

[18] Paramesh Acharya , *Banglar deshaj sikshadhara*, 2009, p. 2.

[19] Bani Basu (Compiler), *Bangla Sisu Sahitya: Granthapanji* (1818–1962), 1965, pp. 23–25. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar wrote two important primers *Varnaparichay I* and *Varnaparichay II* in 1854 and 1855. We see Bengali textbooks making their appearance since 1817; the content of which was largely moral and language was without embellishment. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, we see more attractive story books inspired to some extent by Vidyasagar. Tagore's sister Swarnakumari Devi brought quite a sea change in the quality and style in children's literature of that time. Of course, the golden period of children's literature in Bengal was the one ushered by Tagore himself. He wrote textbooks and books that would constitute the surplus (see Chap. 3 for development of this concept) in reading.

Saraswati (1824–1883) and his follower, Swami Shraddhanand, working on institutionalizing traditional teachings of the Vedas on a model wherein the best of the Orient and the Occident is synthesised on the basis of which he established the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College and an Aryan Girls' School both in 1896 in Lahore. Shraddhanand also set up a Gurukul in the Himalayan mountains in 1902.[20]

In the 1890s, Annie Besant, an English social reformer and a supporter of Theosophy, a religious movement founded by Helena Blavatsky in 1875, came to India and founded the Theosophical Society of India under the aegis of which schools were established. She laid importance on the learning of Sanskrit and the ancient texts, and it was thus the links with Dayanand were formed in the early days; however, Annie Besant made her own path in the field of education with emphasis on girls' education. Her educational goal was, 'To make man a good Citizen of a free and spiritual Commonwealth of Humanity'.[21] Besant came to live in India permanently where she remained interested in the subject of women's education and rights.

The other prominent educational endeavour was the mass education movement launched by Vivekananda (1863–1902), a firebrand social reformer, through the Rama Krishna Mission. The Rama Krishna Mission was established by Swami Vivekananda in the name of his religious teacher, Paramhansa Ramakrishna, a maverick Sadhu. The Mission directed its activities towards mass education. Swami Vivekananda had said, 'We have had a negative education all along from our boyhood. We have only learnt that we are nobodies. Seldom are we given to understand that great men were ever born in our country. …We master all the facts and figures concerning the ancestors of the English, but we are sadly unmindful of our own. …Being a conquered race, we have brought ourselves to believe that we are weak and have no independence in anything. …the faith in our own selves must be reawakened, and then only, all the problems which face our country will gradually be solved by ourselves'.[22] Margaret Noble, an Irish educator, who was one of Vivekananda's closest disciples, lived in India assuming the name of Sister Nivedita. She worked on the educational ideas of Vivekananda as well as participating in the national movement for the promotion of education of which Tagore was also a member. She was familiar with the work of Froebel and Pestalozzi, and it can be supposed that she shared their ideas in her many interactions with Tagore to whom she was close. She had a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, and Tagore may have met some of them through her and she too would have met some of Tagore's friends. It may be interesting to note that it was Sister Nivedita who had urged the scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose, a close friend of Tagore, to persevere in his research and publish his findings.

The National Education Movement for higher education was formed towards the end of the century; this was born out of the public criticism of English educational system. Initially, the focus was to point out the deficiencies and

[20] Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit. pp. 81–82.

[21] Ibid. p. 83.

[22] Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Volume 5, 1964, p. 332; for more details see Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit. p. 116.

disadvantages of an English education broadening it out as a forum for the ideas of nationalist education and nationalist activities. The Bengal National College was established in 1905 by which time Rabindranath had already started his school known as Brahmacharyashram, in Santiniketan discussed in the next chapter.

Many other groups were protesting not only against foreign dominion but also the attempts to restrict the reach of education. The Muslims were not behind-hand in their efforts to spread education—English-medium elementary schools were established in Delhi (1857) where modern education rather than training in Islamic scripture was provided. The history of Islamic schools for modern education established the fact that every creed was becoming aware of the importance of education in the lives of the people. Thus, there was a continuity in the movement for education that owed its origin to the reforms of Rammohun Roy and his times.

2.3 Tagore's Personal Experiences of Education

Tagore expressed the desire to go to school in imitation of his cousins and other youngsters in his family; his illusions of the joys of school were shattered in a very little time. His family tried a number of schools, but when he was about 13 or 14, he set against all kind of formal schooling. The Tagore household took educating the young very seriously, so there was always a system of home tutoring in the house. 'School grabbed the best part of the day, and only fragments of time in the morning and evening slipped through its clutching fingers. As soon as I entered the class-room, the benches and tables forced themselves rudely on my attention, elbowing and jostling their way into my mind. …There is a kind of grasshopper which takes the colour of the withered leaves among which it lurks unobserved. In like manner my spirit also shrank and faded among those faded, drab coloured days'.[23] When Tagore finally stopped going to school, his education at home was taken up in earnest. He had also received by this time a good grounding in the Sanskrit texts to which his father was deeply attached and believed in.

Rabindranath described in detail his trip to the Himalayas passing through the plains of Santiniketan (then referred as Bolpur) with his father who took special care of shaping young Rabindranath's thoughts.[24] This was like a spiritual experience for Tagore as well as a lesson in independence and responsibility. This was also an exposure to the influences of Nature—amid the lofty peaks of the Himalayas and among the forests, greeting the rising sun and saluting the setting one with the words of the Upanishads left a deep impression on Tagore's precocious and sensitive mind. That the world came to regard him as a sage seems to date back to the time he spent in the company of his saintly father who was known as the Maharshi or the great sage. Rabindranath grew up as a man of immense

[23] RNT, *My Boyhood Days*, tr. Marjorie Sykes, 2nd Edition, 2011, pp. 36–37.

[24] RNT, *Jivansmriti*, Centenary Edition, Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee (ed.) 4th Edition, 2011, pp. 43–56.

calmness that radiated in his demeanour helping him weather the many bereavements in his lifetime—he lost his wife, father, two of his children in quick succession (between 1902 and 1907) by the time he was only 46 years of age.[25]

Tagore's childhood experience of the home schooling he received and anecdotes from his reminiscences inform us of the lessons he had to undergo and his reaction to them. The day's routine was well packed with lessons. The child was woken up while it was still dark and made to practise wrestling after which a medical student would come to teach him physiology complete with Latin names of the bones of a human skeleton. With the mathematics tutor, Rabindranath practised almost all the branches; followed by lessons in natural science with simple experiments and then lessons in Sanskrit and Bengali that were taught by various tutors. He ate his first major meal at about 9.30 in the morning, and at 10, he was sent to school. His schedule after coming back from school was equally packed; at 4.30 in the afternoon, he had his lessons with the gymnastic teacher, drawing master and last of all when he was almost dropping with sleep, the English teacher. The house musicians supplemented Rabindranath's musical education. Here too, forced lessons did not work but what he picked up he did so by choice. He was gifted with a good musical sense and voice as well as an appreciation of all genres of music. 'Books tell us that the discovery of fire was one of the biggest discoveries of man. I do not wish to dispute this—but I cannot help feeling how fortunate the little birds are that their parents cannot light lamps in the evening. They have their language lessons early in the morning and how gleefully they learn them! But then they do not have to learn the English language'.[26] Tagore remarked, 'My learning at any rate was a profitless cargo. If one seeks to key an instrument at too high a pitch, the strings will snap beneath the strain'.[27]

What were the activities and interests of young Rabi's childhood? He was not the usual truant or that all his lessons were 'tipped out of the boat and sent to the bottom'.[28] He was intensely curious and attracted to nature, to the beauty of a breaking dawn, the shimmering leaves with the dewdrops at their ends, the lure of the unknown and faraway. He described all this through the character of a little boy, Amal in his famous play, *The Post Office* (Dakghar 1912; tr.1914).[29] Rabindranath described how one corner of the roof of the rambling family home was his secret kingdom and of his adventurous voyages in the unused palanquin kept in the hall near the entrance of the house. He was an avid audience to the

[25] Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore—A Biography*, 2008, pp. 212–221.

[26] Ibid. p. 35.

[27] RNT, *My Boyhood Days*, tr. Marjorie Sykes, op. cit. p. 42.

[28] Ibid., p. 42.

[29] RNT, *Dakghar*, 1912; translated by Tagore in 1914. This play was a major break with the traditional proscenium theatre, and its very simplicity helps convey the vibrancy of a child's mind. William Radice, in Translator's Foreword in his translation, *The Post Office*, 2008, p. 10. mentions the fact, '…the play…its performance by Jewish children in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942, who were in the care of Janusz Korczak, a celebrated pediatrician and educationist … influenced by Rabindranath's educational ideas.' This is seen as a testimony to the redemptive quality of the play.

stories told in the servants' quarters where most of the children of the household could be found. He recalled the wonderful stories narrated by one of the servants that thrilled him no end. He discovered the muse of poetry when he was very young and once he found her, there was no looking back—he had found himself and his vocation. He wrote, 'Like a young deer which butts here, there and everywhere with its newly sprouting horns, I made myself a nuisance with my budding poetry'[30]; very little of his early efforts have survived.

Engaged thus in exploring nature and his own self in the deepest ways, Rabindranath reached his youth. He seemed to emerge from the cocoon of the family environment to spread himself in the outer world. The Bengal renaissance, of which the Tagore household was like its hive, claimed the budding talent of Rabi. In 1875, Rabi recited his panegyric poem, an ode to his country, 'Bharatvarsha', at the gathering of the Hindu Mela, a sociopolitical organization playing an unforgettable role in the phase of the initial awakening and the development of nationalist consciousness in the country. It propagated the art, literature and music of the people. 'Looked at from the outside, our family appears to have accepted many foreign customs, but at its heart flames a national pride that has never flickered'.[31] The Hindu Mela was a precursor to the Indian National Congress under whose banner the freedom of the country was won. Many songs were composed for the sessions of the Hindu Mela; quite a number of songs came from the Tagore household. Rabindranath's poem, 'Bharatvarsha' (1875), was enthusiastically received and was published in the leading Anglo-Bengali weekly (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*).[32] The trend of reciting his poems in public began and so began his identity as a poet. His interest in literature also developed—it was the time of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novels that revolutionized the Bengali literary scene. Once again, we see the importance of the role of the press and the Bengali journals and magazines in which these novels and other writings appeared often in a serial form.

2.4 The Varied Roads to Education

Rabindranath's appearance on the Bengali literary horizon and being accorded a positive response right from his teenage years gave him the confidence to interact with other writers and poets. However, he was still not sure about what his future would shape up to and it was during this period of uncertainty, his family decided to send him to England with his third brother, Satyendranath who was a member of the Indian Civil Service, the first Indian to be so. Satyendranath's wife and two children had already settled themselves in England, and Satyendranath was waiting to wind up his administrative duties in Ahmedabad where he was posted. In order to prepare for his visit, Rabindranath went first to Ahmedabad where he gorged

[30] RNT, *My Reminiscences*, op. cit. p. 34.

[31] Ibid. p. 133.

[32] Krishna Kripalani, op. cit. p. 52.

himself on the wide selection of books in his brother's library and later to Bombay to stay with a family in order to learn European customs and English. Tagore's eldest brother, Dwijendranath, and his fifth brother, Jyotirindranath, started in 1877 the literary magazine, *Bharati,* in which a number of writings of Rabindranath appeared. Prior to his departure to England in September 1878, his writings that appeared in the magazine were included in books of poems such as Kabikahini (1878), Banaphool (1880) and Saisab Sangit (1884).[33] When in England, he was admitted to a school in Brighton and later to the University College, London. He did not complete any of his courses, but he wrote long letters home about his stay in England and visits to some European countries. In these letters collected in *Europeprobasir Patra* (*Letters of a Sojourner in Europe*), we see the nascent stirrings of his ideas of education and the importance of travel as a means of broadening the understanding of different cultures. It was also the means by which he could see the advantages and disadvantages of each society, the English and the Bengali.[34]

Tagore developed a keen interest in Western music and also discovered his own special talent in this field. On his return home, he wrote a musical drama *Valmiki Pratibha* (The Genius of Valmiki) with songs set to tunes that were born out of a fusion of Indian and Western tunes borrowed from Irish, Scottish and English ballads. The musical drama was staged in 1881 in public in which Rabindranath played the role of Valmiki. This unleashed the vast reservoir of his songs that he wrote throughout his life and also set to music. He wrote more than 2,178 songs[35] to which he was very attached and predicted that he would live through these songs even if his body of literature was forgotten. 'I have introduced some new elements in our music…. This is a parallel growth to my poetry…. I get lost in my songs, and then I think that these are my best work; I get quite intoxicated. I often feel that, if all my poetry is forgotten, my songs will live with my countrymen, and have a permanent place'.[36] The range of his songs is like a rainbow, spanning the horizon of emotions, situations, spirituality, and patriotism, celebratory of seasons, philosophy, nature and drama. The tunes and beats are as varied, derived from the Indian classical traditions (*ragas*) of all corners of the country; folk tunes, melodies; and Western ballads.[37] Thus, Tagore comes into his youth armed with a reflective mind

[33] For further details, see Bhabatosh Dutta, 'Tagore: A Short Biography' in *Introduction to Tagore*, 1997, Kolkata, Visva-Bharati, p. 61.

[34] The collection of letters under the mentioned title was published serially in *Bharati*, 1879–1880; the letters translated as *Letters of a Sojourner in Europe* in 2008. An educationist, Bratin Chattopadhyay in *Sikshar Nirman: Prasanga Rabindranath*, 2012, marks the ninth letter in this collection as being significant in Tagore's ideas of education. We find in the letter, very progressive ideas of modern society and of the freedom of interactions of European men and women and the need for women, likewise in India to emerge out of their domestic confines. Tagore developed this theme in his celebrated novel *Ghare Baire*, later made into a film by Satyajit Ray in 1981.

[35] William Radice, 'Keys to the Kingdom: The Search for How Best to Understand and Perform the Songs of Rabindranath Tagore' in Kathleen M. O'Connell and Joseph T. O'Connell (eds.) *Rabindranath Tagore: Reclaiming a Cultural Icon*, 2009, p. 129.

[36] Ibid, RNT Interview with Edward Thompson, 1926 as cited by William Radice, p. 123.

[37] Reba Som, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and his Song*, 2009, pp. 29–30.

and many talents that give his creativity room to play within himself and in many ways to be transmitted and transmute all those who came in contact with Tagore—they would be touched in some way or the other.

2.5 Tagore Entering the Public Space

Rabindranath came back to India at his father's behest in 1880 after a short stay of 17 months—it was clear that Tagore's stay in England would not come to any professional profit. He did not return with any degree or qualification. In 1883, he was married to a bride barely 10 years old and almost illiterate to whom he gave the name Mrinalini replacing her original name, Bhavatarini, a most unfashionable name by the standards of any day. Rabindranath was a little over 22 in age and he did not have any specific family responsibility. The only demand placed on him was by the editors of the journals who were his family members that he continue to fill the pages of the family magazines, *Balak* and *Bharati*; for the former, he wrote pieces for children, and for the latter, he wrote polemical pieces. His father, Devendranath, involved Rabindranath in the activities of the Adi Brahmo Samaj, a religious reform movement founded by Devendranath, a departure from the original Brahmo Sabha later known as Samaj founded by Raja Rammohun Roy in 1828. The Brahmo Samaj was a well-thought-out ideology for religious reform and its appeal was to the educated urban elite. The Brahmo Samaj believed in monotheism and was against idolatry, of any kind. Rabindranath's involvement in the work of the Samaj as the Secretary gave him the space and scope to discover his own spirituality and engage intellectually with institutional religion. Here too, we find an outpouring of writing, articles and essays in which he expressed his position on various issues of the day in a lucid and balanced manner. We find in Tagore a natural tendency to shun extreme views—in the matter of the Samaj, he never rejected the old nor accepted the new without qualification. If there was anything that he accepted in toto was his extreme love of nature, life, and humanity besides, unalloyed joy in his creative energy that he expressed with his whole being.

Rabindranath became a father when he was 25; the firstborn was a daughter, Madhurilata (Bela); 2 years later, his son, Rathindranath, was born and then his three other children (two daughters and a son). Other than Rathindranath and the youngest daughter, Meera, none of the children lived long. His father transferred the responsibility of looking after the family estates in the erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh) on to Rabindranath soon after he became a father. It may also be noted that by this time, Rabindranath was a poet who was now looked at with respect not only for the beauty of the poems but for the style, the innovation in rhyme and prosody and the content; there was maturity in his writing; his interest extended outwards from the self with a deep love of humanity and its triumphs and failures. He had certainly outgrown his effusive phase. '…on 3 November 1890 the poems of *Manasi* (Of the Mind) were published. Their wide range and sweep of thought, their lyrical beauty and strength (like a rider at ease on a spirited horse,

in firm control of his seat) convinced even his worst critics that here was indeed a poet. According to Edward Thompson, "the prevailing note of the book is quiet certainty; it marks his definite attainment of maturity"'.[38]

The following facts are very significant in tracing the roots of Tagore's educational work and journey as an educationist. Becoming a father meant assuming, the responsibility of educating his children and managing the estates brought him face to face with the realization of the family economics. In spite of the fact that there were many elder brothers and the traditional rule of primogeniture the accepted convention, Devendranath chose to pass over the reins of the family to the youngest son who was happy to be a poet. Here too, we encounter the very unconventional personality of Devendranath—he recognized the yet nascent but sterling qualities of perseverance and dutifulness that were increasingly seen in Tagore as he became older and embarked on his own projects. Rabindranath was ready to leave the cocoon of his protected and sheltered life under the umbrella of his father—he was always ready to stand up and be counted.

Prior to taking up his responsibility of the family estates, Rabindranath allowed his energies to take up anything that was set to him or that interested him—he was principally a poet and a writer though he did give his mind to topics and issues of his times. Once he came in contact with real rural life and was lured by the beauty of rural Bengal that we say he was inspired to come into his own, his creative energy became unbound and was poured into songs, stories, novels, poems, essays and ideas. 'His literary work so far was based purely on idea and imagination. He now had the opportunity of living in close proximity to the life of the common folk. He had a direct and intimate experience of the life of the poor achieving an authentic knowledge of their social problems, their customs and rites and their general social manners. From the world of poetic fancy he descended into the immediacy of real life.'[39] This was the time that he contributed extensively to the magazine called *Sadhana* that had replaced *Bharati*.

In Selaidaha and Patisar, the locations of his family estates, Tagore started to think about education and looked for ways and means to provide education to his children. He also realized the importance of mass education but was not convinced that the British system of education available in the public domain was right for the Indian people. After his foray into ideas 'educational' and progressiveness in the letters written from Europe, there is no article so identified till 1892, when he wrote *Sikshar Herpher* or the Discrepancies of Education. Tagore now entered the first phase of his educational ideas and thinking. He had already undertaken some little experiments aimed at alleviating the miserable conditions of the poor villagers on his estates. The efforts were in education, health and sanitation, improved agriculture, access to potable water, a cooperative of farmers and other such measures. We see in these the seeds of the Rural Reconstruction programme that he started in 1922 in his university, Visva-Bharati.

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[38] Krishna Kripalani, op. cit. p. 134 citing Edward Thompson who was an English critic and poet who regularly corresponded with Tagore and even translated some of his poems from original Bengali.

[39] Bhabatosh Dutta 1997, op. cit. p. 63.

Rabindranath's personal disillusion with schools during his childhood was a prime mover for the establishment of his school; the restlessness of his spirit and rejection of all kinds of parochialism or narrowness provided the impetus for the formation of Visva-Bharati, and his personal experiences of the miseries of Bengal peasantry sowed the seeds of his village extension work. These demonstrate his courage of independent thinking, of having the confidence in his impressions so as to act on them, his deep sensitivity and his immense capacity for hard work. He successfully sublimated his motives in varied constructive paths. Therein, we find an answer to his inner dynamism and life force from which we can learn and grow. His progression from one stage to another, the process of continuous growth and self-realization and his extension of his self outwards into the wider world took him on the journey of self-actualization and achieving a fullness of life seldom encountered in the world.

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Chapter 3
Progressive Ideas and the Idea of the Tapovana

Abstract The model of the ancient hermitage (tapovana/asrama) served as the prototype of Tagore's school established in 1901 in the rural area of Santiniketan, away from the city of Calcutta named Brahmacharyashram that was later renamed Patha Bhavana. He desired to situate the school in the midst of nature in a wide expanse of land. The chapter describes how Tagore transformed his vision to practically create the asrama of his ideals. In spite of the fact that Tagore was not a theoretician in education per se, he proved his consummate control over the practice of education that stood the test of time. In this chapter, there is a discussion of the educational writings of Tagore prior to his decision to start a school. We find in these writings a passionate plea for the need to rethink about the nature of education that would be appropriate to the Indian ethos and social reality; there is a detailed discussion about the medium of instruction; about the content of study; the absorption and use of knowledge, as well as the aims and objectives of education. In fact, India is still trying to find an effective solution to Tagore's concern for the colonial emphasis on English as a medium of instruction in the modern education system. Tagore was equally concerned about the disconnect between the educated and those who had not been educated. He expressed the view that it was the social responsibility of the educated to bridge such gaps and extend themselves to the community at large.

Keywords Hermitage as prototype of school • Indian ethos and education • Links between the educated and uneducated • Education and community

> …I too have come carrying a particle of fire/from the unseen and unbegun to one small/ corner of a narrow strip of space and time….[1]

[1] Rabindranath Tagore (henceforth RNT), 'The cosmic Stage' (tr. Tarak Sen) 1941, included in Humayun Kabir (ed.) *The Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 243.

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3.1 Constituents of Progressive Ideas

The essay, 'Sikshar Herpher' or the Discrepancies in Education (1892) published in *Sadhana*, is regarded as Rabindranath's first major article on education, an essay wide in its scope and gamut. The tone is restrained and not in the least pedantic. It is an unusual piece of prose that ends with the parable of a beggar who in preparing for winter barely manages to scrape together the amount required to buy a warm blanket whereupon he finds it is summer and when he has the means to buy appropriate clothes for summer he realizes that winter had returned! This cycle goes on till God decides to take pity on him and grant him a boon. The beggar asks for nothing but for God to help him overcome this vicissitude so that he is at least adequately clad for the particular season! Tagore likens this experience to that of the people in India—he says: 'Let God grant us food when we are hungry; clothes according to the season; language that is in keeping with our thoughts; and a life that follows our education—only then our discrepancies will be resolved'. In this context, it may be remembered that English education was gaining ground in India. The learning and mastery of the English language took up much of the children's time and energy and this was a kind of rote activity in which the mind and mental faculties were not overly engaged; thus, when the time came for the content of the learnt material to be digested and used, the time appropriate to it had gone by. The discrepancy in medium and thought enfeebled the intellectual capacities.

It is worth our while to go through the article at some length. Tagore builds up his arguments for education of children in a step by step logical manner highlighting the following aspects: (1) the idea of surplus; (2) the distinction between text and other books and the role of literature as a gateway to knowledge; (3) the issues of medium of instruction; and (4) the processes of learning; the absorption and use of knowledge. Let me analyse each of the above theoretical constructs:

The idea of surplus engaged Tagore throughout his life. He ascribed man's reaching out beyond the essential or bare necessity as a manifestation of surplus. Tagore believed that it was Nature in which man found his natural environment to explore and experience this surplus.[2] He explained that man was never satisfied in being confined to the absolute necessity; in many aspects, his spirit soared beyond these limiting boundaries while in some other aspects, he appeared to be within bounds. Man's aspiration to transcend boundaries was akin to needing a home

[2] RNT, *Creative Unity*, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. 2 (henceforth EWRT2), 'Our needs are always in a hurry. They rush and hustle, they are rude and unceremonious; they have no surplus of leisure, no patience for anything else but fulfillment of purpose.' 1996, p. 495. Also, ibid. 'The instruments of our necessity assert that we have food, shelter, clothes, comforts and convenience, and yet men spend an immense amount of their time and resources in contradicting this assertion, to prove that they are not a mere living catalogue of endless wants…' p. 495. cf. Sisir Kumar Ghose (ed.), Preface, 'He calls it [Art] the Angel of Surplus.' in *Angel of Surplus: Some Essays and Addresses of Aesthetics by Rabindranath Tagore*, 2nd Edition, 2010, p. 20.

much bigger than his mere mortal size; people needed an educational ambience that catered to more than what was prescribed. Children, likewise, needed exposure in excess of their syllabus. He discussed the value of reading beyond mere textbooks for while the textbooks gave information and rigour, outside reading stirred the imagination and urged independent interpretation. Tagore claimed that it was through the surplus thus created from a mix of text and books of literature that the child was led to attain intellectual maturity. When he started his own school, he approached this problem by creating reading lists for different age groups.

In contemporary times, there is a movement for creating texts that are both informative and imaginative, a very positive initiative theoretically taking care of additional or 'surplus' reading. In reality, however, the overload of textbooks and the scholastic weight of the syllabus have not been balanced, and the prescribed syllabus cannot be managed other than by excisions by teachers and students because of which instruction or teaching is reduced to the essential and the available surplus remains unexplored; thus, a good initiative becomes difficult to implement. Interestingly, there are occasional mentions in Tagore's writings about the excesses of surplus that can lead to not-so-desirable results—Tagore describes in his autobiography[3] how his teacher 'would sometimes try to bring the zephyr of outside knowledge to play on our arid schoolroom routine. One day he took a paper parcel out of his pocket and said: 'Today I'll show you a wonderful piece of work by the Creator'. Then he untied the wrapping and produced a portion of the windpipe of a human being and proceeded to expound on the marvels of its mechanism. I still remember my shock…my dismay….I could not respond to the enthusiasm with which he discoursed that day'. '…a very great musician called Jadu Bhatta came and stayed in the house. He made one big mistake in being determined to teach me music, and consequently no teaching took place. Nevertheless I did casually pick up from him a certain amount of stolen knowledge'.[4] I am tempted to cite another example of the excess of surplus from his autobiography—'*Meghnadbad*, was not a thing of joy to us….To employ an epic to teach language is like using a sword to shave—disrespectful to the sword and distressing for the cheek'.[5] Notwithstanding the above instances, Tagore had abiding faith in the idea of surplus that stimulated intellectual functions. Thus, we see that the construct of the idea of intellectual surplus engaged him and he never tired of opportunities of expounding upon it.

Tagore's distinction between various categories of books and his dismay at the choices of books made by committees for children to read bears mention. He lamented the fact that there were hardly any books for children in their own language during his time. We can take a brief look at the history of children's literature in nineteenth century Bengal for some clues to Tagore's regrets. The second

[3] RNT, *My Reminiscensces*, tr. Surendranath Tagore, 2008, p. 40.

[4] RNT, *Boyhood Days*, tr. Radha Chakravarty, 2007, p. 42.

[5] RNT in *My* Reminiscences, op. cit. p. 54, refers to Michael Madhusudan Dutt, poet before Tagore's time who wrote the masterpiece *Meghnadbadkavya*, based on an episode from the *Ramayana* in blank verse using a kind of Chaucerian Bengali.

decade of the nineteenth century through the proliferation of the printing press brought about the publication of primers and other books. There was some children's literature in the form of story books that were published with publication houses dedicated to one or more genre of literature. However, the output was neither prolific nor were the books very attractive. This brings us to the other significant point—Tagore saw literature as the gateway to education. Good literature attracted and kindled imagination, creativity and gave pleasure. Tagore's own primers, such as the series *Sahaj Path,* books on learning English and the books on various subjects that he commissioned the teachers of his school to write that were a study in contrast, would come only towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Prior to these efforts, we have Vidyasagar's *Varna Parichay* (1855), a set of two primers to teach Bengali through the narrative style with a graded complexity of words starting with alphabet and basic grammar. Thus, the situation in 1892 was bleak and discouraging.[6]

Many years later (1933) in an address at the University of Calcutta, Tagore eloquently talked about the paucity of academic books in the Bengali language. 'Modern Bengali literature is a creation and a necessity of the present age. There is no doubt that it has brought our minds into touch with modern learning, but it is not importing from overseas all the food that is available there. Science, which is bringing into play, in various forms, the intellectual powers of men in the twentieth century…is scarcely on visiting terms with Bengali literature….Bengali literature is almost wholly made up of fiction, poetry and drama, …there is arrangement for a feast of sentiment and not for the display of intellectual power. Western culture…is a combination of various mental forces. Humanity there keeps itself occupied simultaneously with the body, the mind and the soul….science, education and literature have combined to keep the Western mind in a state of vigorous action and improvements effected in all of them have resulted in constantly increasing its capacity for practical work'.[7] Historically, it was the age of cultural and social awakening; the Bengali novel, poetry and nationalist feelings were making their presence through books, magazines and newspapers. The Bengali language itself was developing, and thus, it was probably not realistic to expect that there would be multi-directional and multi-genre flowering in the area of publications. Modern education was just touching the country's shores and modern institutions were in their infancy. The industrial revolution was yet to be firmly established in India. India under colonial rule was not in a position to grapple with many of the issues besetting the modern world with one exception being the political front in which we find radical, pacifist, conciliatory, confrontational, abstractional efforts, initiatives and debates filling the intellectual space.[8]

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[6] For more details, see Bani Basu, *Banglar Sishusahitya: Granthapanji,* 1965. See also, Jogijiban Goswami, *Bangla Pathyapustaker Itihas*, 2008.

[7] RNT, 'The Diffusion of Education', *Introduction to Tagore*, 1997, pp. 18–19.

[8] Tapan Raychauduri, 'Gandhi and Tagore: Where the Twain Met', *Perceptions*, *Emotions, Sensibilities: Essays on India's Colonial and Post-colonial Experiences*, 2005, pp. 141–151.

Tagore has let flow his diatribe against the language issue—the medium of instruction. It has filled his writings to a great extent and he indeed had very firm views on this. He was convinced that having to learn in a foreign tongue was one of the most significant reasons for our intellectual impoverishment manifested in the inability to be innovative, creative or able to repose confidence in our knowledge. Throughout this article (Sikshar Herpher), Tagore advocates the efficiency and efficacy of knowledge coming through mother tongue and why it was counterproductive to approach modern education through a foreign language. During the first half of the nineteenth century, English language teaching and English language schools were almost *de rigueur* among the minority elite, in that there were some exclusive institutions catering to this minority. For the general public, 'The schools network… consisted chiefly of vernacular schools which provided a sound if conservative basis for higher studies. … Till the 1960s, India's most distinguished scholars, scientists, statesmen virtually all went to vernacular schools, often in remote villages'.[9] However, the number of schools were neither adequate nor of uniform standard. The schools were modelled after the English system of education of the period; the influence was felt in the increasing state patronage extended to English medium and English teaching schools. By the time Tagore was born (1861), English had attained pride of place slowly driving the vernacular into the shade. It was also found that elementary education came to be neglected and higher education from the secondary schools onward up to the universities was encouraged.[10] During the early days of colonization, the schools that were there, largely private enterprises, the three-language policy was followed (Sanskrit/Arabic, Persian and Bengali as spoken language).[11]

Tagore emphasized the important roles of imagination and memory in the absorption of any language. He explained that from the point of view of vocabulary and structure (rules of grammar, etc.), English and Bengali were very different as was the subject matter of their texts. Children had very little familiarity with what they were reading in English. He was insightful when he said that it was easier to understand that which we were familiar with, and in such a situation, we could embellish and interpret the suggested ideas. The problem of learning English was further compounded when teachers of English were themselves not so well-versed in the language; it was quite probable that they had learnt English by rote as they laid stress on their students doing the same. It was quite difficult for the young charges under such care to have got any enjoyment out of what they were reading. The ability to think and imagine was essential for going through life, and it was necessary that this

[9] Sukanta Chaudhuri, 'Education and equality', *The* Telegraph, Vol. XXXI, Number 38, 17 June 2013.

[10] H. B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness*: *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, 2013, pp. 3–4.

[11] Bratin Chattopadhyay, *On Education and Rabindranath* Tagore, 2000, p. 45. From the report, we see that in three districts of Bengal, there were a little over 200 vernacular schools with 3,000 students in total. The situation in the rest of India would not have been better than this.

training was given from an early age so that these skills were available when needed to solve life's problems. Over emphasis on learning a language other than mother tongue was regressive; thought and ideation were almost banished. Rather, there needed to be a focus on developing cognitive skills right from the beginning so that there was concordance between what was read and the ideas suggested. It was meaningless to stack up information that could not be built on. Thus, the fundamental truth of education was that acquiring of knowledge and construction based on it had to go hand in hand and journey together. In Tagore's vision, language and thought were intimately connected and when they were in harmonious resonance with each other true education in keeping with life experience was effected.

Tagore's arguments for Bengali language teaching are found in a vast body of his essays, letters and lectures. He was aware of the lack of adequate texts in Bengali and aware that teachers were not willing to opt for Bengali because of the lack of textbooks. He explained that the demand for Bengali textbooks would be created when teaching was done in Bengali and that we were not to wait for that opportune moment when there would be books. He described this situation as 'the tree waiting for the leaves' before it grew its branches! I have with purpose quoted Tagore so liberally when writing this, the reasons are to highlight the sheer beauty of his prose, his similes are not the conventional adages and hyperboles that we generally encounter and also in admiration of his insight and power of prescience. India is yet to find a solution to the conundrum of 'which language' or 'what text' even after 66 years of self-rule.

A literal reading of his essays, championing Bengali especially as the medium of instruction, could possibly lead the reader to conclude that Tagore was parochial and that he ignored the rest of the vast country called India whose diversity he himself celebrated in his poems and songs.[12] There is a need for a more nuanced reading—there is no doubt that Tagore meant the vernaculars or the tongues of the people of India even when he only mentioned Bengali. Also the time during which Tagore was writing was the time when the position of Calcutta and Bengal was at its height—socially, culturally, politically and historically; thus, the primacy of Bengali was natural.

Undoubtedly, there is a lot of truth in Tagore's arguments about the importance of education in mother tongue, and even in the contemporary world almost a century later, India is still trying to evolve the right language policy or policies to be implemented in schools. With over 800 languages spoken in India,[13] a considerable number of those languages have no scripts and sometimes the language groups having small populations; one can imagine the strain on the resources of the State or anyone in providing education in every mother tongue. However, we cannot

[12] Tagore's song *Jana Gana Mana* (1911), adopted as the national anthem in 1937 is one the best examples of Tagore celebrating India's diversity. For more details, see Alpana Ray (ed.), *Rabindranather Swadeshi Gaan*, 2007, p. 32.

[13] For details of the language survey of India undertaken by Sir George Abraham Grierson from 1898 to 1927, see K. S. Singh and S. Manoharan (eds.), *Languages and Scripts*, 1993, p. 4.

deny the fact that the problem is acute when the language of instruction is different from the language of birth. This problem is felt more severely among minority groups who are not wholly integrated into plural societies.[14] Under the aegis of the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT), the National Curricular Framework in its policy document (2005) has noted, '[mother tongue] provides a bank of memories and symbols inherited from one's fellow speakers and created in one's own lifetime. It is also a medium through which most knowledge is constructed, and hence it is closely tied to the thought and identity of the individual. In fact, it is so closely tied to the thought and identity that to deny or wipe out a child's mother tongue is to interfere with the sense of self'.[15] India in contemporary times has made attempts to arrange for mother tongue teaching, at least in the dominant regional languages,[16] but the sheer number of such languages makes this a daunting task. There is also the counterforce of the feeling of denial of opportunities when vernacular teaching instead of English is insisted upon by the State while for all practical purposes, especially in the employment market, English is the lingua franca. There were many other factors that propelled English to the forefront such as forces of modernity, progressiveness and a way of overcoming feelings of social inferiority or exclusion. In India, the sword cuts two-ways! The advantage of India retaining English after Independence is that India has the largest English speaking, reading and writing population; but it is also significant that the Indian regional vernaculars have not evolved into the lingua franca of academic discourse. There is also disparity among those who know English and those who do not. However, many of the ills of English education expressed by Tagore are sadly valid even today.[17] The national language, Hindi has uneven success as a link language rather relegated to the language of entertainment[18] than academic. There are no easy solutions to this.

Ethnologists working on Indian communities have reported that there are a number of communities living in plural situations who are multi-lingual; this can also be seen among the tribes who live as neighbours of other communities.[19] Scholars working on primary education post-independence (since 1947 till today) have reported that the languages spoken by some communities do not have

[14] Boro Baski, 'Giving Children a Future: How I Teach Santal Village Children', Boro Basko and Kumkum Bhattacharya (eds.), *Celebrating Life: The Santal Experiment in Freedom*, 2006, pp. 9–12. See also Boro Baski, 'Teaching Santal Children', H. Dembowski (ed.), *D+C Development and Cooperation*', *International Journal,* Bonn, Frankenallee 71–81, D-60327 Frankfurt am Main, 2009, pp. 280–282.

[15] See Bratin Chattopadhyay, *Sikshar Nirman: Prasanga Rabindranath*, 2012, p. 215.

[16] The Constitution of India, VIIIth Schedule—official list of 22 recognized Indian languages at present.

[17] Bratin Chattopadhyay, *On Education and Rabindranath*, 2000, p. 77.

[18] The large number of Bollywood Hindi films, the largest industry after Hollywood and the serials in the national television networks certify the universal appeal and acceptance of the Hindi language at least in the bigger northern half of the country but as a language of governance including the judiciary and higher education English is the *de facto* official language.

[19] K. S. Singh and S. Manoharan (eds.), op. cit. p. 22.

scripts—the communities have oral traditions and the lack of script compounds the problems of training teachers, creating texts and making teaching relevant to the everyday life of people. Education being a State policy with a pan-national parity in structure, the State has little option but to teach a particular content; painting all with the same brush has not yielded the desired results. Thus, it is clear that language or medium of instruction is still very important and has a lot of impact on education. Gandhi echoed Tagore in decrying education in a foreign tongue, 'Almost from the commencement the textbooks deal not with things the boys and girls have always to deal with in their homes, but things to which they are perfect strangers…at the end of…education…becomes estranged from…surroundings… education is calculated to wean…from traditional culture'.[20]

3.2 Tagore's Responses to the Social Realities

The essays of Tagore between 1881 and 1901[21] are counted in the first phase of Tagore's thoughts on education; this was the pre-Santiniketan period. In some of his other essays and letters during this period, we see a serious engagement with issues intimately connected with education, the issues were not topical during his times—there was discussion on how science education for the masses had to be accomplished in mother tongue[22]; how it was important for caste barriers to be breached through education and how this could be done if education was given in the vernacular medium enabling the mass irrespective of any class to access it and his dream of starting a hermitage school (to be discussed in the next section).[23] He exhorted students who had completed their formal education to think deeply of the past glory of the vast country lying outside their homes and the general curriculum of their education; he explained to the students that their education had created a disconnect between the educated and those who had not been educated in the English pattern,[24] and this was one of his first expression of the importance of an educated person extending himself to the community, an idea whose time had not come, an idea that agitated his mind during the creation of his institutions

[20] M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 1 September, 1921.

[21] The time period stretches from *Letters from a sojourner in Europe* (1881) to the major essay Sikshar Herpher (1892). Leading intellectuals of Bengal, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (pioneering Bengali novelist) and others praised this essay and accepted the propositions therein.

[22] RNT, 'Relevant Words', *Rabindra Rachanavali* (henceforth RR), Vol. 6, 1986. An anecdote illustrates this, a well-known physicist, had once remarked if one could not explain physics in one's own language, it was a proof that the person did not actually know physics.

[23] RNT's letter to scientist and intimate friend Jagadish Bose dated July 1901, Rabindra Bhavana Archives, (henceforth RB), Serial Number 239 of Correspondence files (Bengali).

[24] RNT, 'Address to students', cited in Satyendranath Ray (ed.), *Rabindranather Chintajagat:Sikshachinta*, 1982, pp. 79–84.

especially in Sriniketan in the last phase of his educational endeavour. We also find his thoughts on the understanding of history, the importance of studying the local or regional cultural history[25] that he had elaborated on later in his life. He wanted the students to engage in innovative, original and creative work as that would be a fitting reply to the colonial teachers; he outlined certain important and significant projects such as a dictionary and a grammar that was not an imitation of Sanskrit grammar but based on the many dialects of Bengali; he repeated his views about the problems of proper absorption of education when there was a mismatch of language, thought and application first mentioned in Sikshar Herpher.

Tagore was sensitive to issues of ethnology and sociology, he rued the fact that education in these fields under the colonial pattern did not prepare the educated classes to understand the neighbouring communities such as the low castes and the downtrodden nor did the educated classes show any desire to do so as in their opinion, they were not worth their while. There was no interest in collecting items of folk culture and information on aspects of village societies; people of the country were alien to each other.[26]

In the later essays and letters of this period, the nascent ideas of starting a school as a symbol of practical demonstration of his concept were taking shape in Tagore. In a letter to his friend, the scientist, Jagadish Bose, Tagore wrote about his wish to start a hermitage or asrama school in the midst of nature, away from the hustle and bustle of the city. In another essay, he discussed the necessity of the spread of primary education among the masses, to think of a way of education by which the educated could come to assume responsibility for the development of their own country and, above all, freedom from the control of the State. How contemporarily relevant Tagore's ideas are—India is yet to provide education to all even today or resolve the conflicts of interest between the State and non-State!

3.3 Tagore Shaping His Ideas: The Modern Hermitage

Tagore's poem 'Ebar phirao more' or 'Call me back now'[27] (1894) marks a shift in his perspective from a carefree romantic poet to one who was answering the call of the self to engage with the wider world outside of the self. '…it reveals in the most passionate language the tumultuous conflict…between his retired and introverted

[25] Ibid.

[26] RNT, 'Address to students', cited in Satyendranath Ray (ed.) op.cit. pp. 79–84.

[27] The poet exhorts himself in this poem: 'While the world was busy with a hundred chores,/You played O Poet upon your flute the livelong day/… We must bring speech to these dumb denuded lips./We must light with hope these weary empty hearts,/We must call to them and say;/'Hold your heads high and together stand./…/Gather yourself O Poet and arise./If you have courage, bring it as your gift./There is so much sorrow and pain,/call me back to the world's firm shore…' Tr. Humayun Kabir from Humayun Kabir (ed.), *Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*, 2005, pp. 40–46.

life as a poet and the urgent call of the…grim realities to a life of action and sacrifice, a call that came to him through his intimate acquaintance with the ignorance, poverty…of the vast population of his country…'.[28] When Tagore took over the management of the family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), he came into direct contact with the realities of peasant life. He had shifted with his immediate family (wife and children) to Selaidaha (his family estates) where he started home schooling for his children—he did not want them to endure what he had to do during his childhood in schools that stymied his self. This measure was a testimony to his courage in taking a bold and unconventional step; it also marked his foray into the realm of giving shape to his ideas—a precursor to the establishment of his own school in Santiniketan a few years later. The cardinal aspects of this measure of home schooling in a rural area were to provide an educational experience in the midst of nature where children could enjoy freedom, embark on their own discoveries and be educated.

Tagore was attracted by the ancient idea of the hermitage in his idea of establishing a school. This was usually found in the middle of a forest where gurus and their disciples lived with each other away from the influences of family and society in the pursuit of knowledge and a particular lifestyle built on cooperation, self-help and creativity. Rabindranath's father, Devendranath, had purchased 20 *bighas* (3 bigha = 1 acre) of land[29] in which he had built an asrama. The asrama is situated about 3 km from the nearest railway station, Bolpur.[30] 'Devendranath by a trust deed dedicated this land to the public. The Asrama was established in 1890 and an all-faith prayer hall was built and inaugurated in 1891 on the seventh day of Pous (23 December) in commemoration of Devendranath's initiation into the Brahma religion. Around this date, the locally popular fair or *pous mela* was organized. Today, the property of Visva-Bharati is about 2,500 *bighas*'.[31] On the original 20 bighas or 7 acres, Devendranath permitted his son to establish his own school. Tagore moved to Santiniketan from Selaidaha with his family for this purpose. 'I used to live quietly at Selaidaha with my literary pursuits by the banks of the river Padma. There I felt the urge to do something creative and I came to Santiniketan with that resolve'.[32] Rabindranath in his *My Reminiscences* (1917)[33] had described his school experience and how his spirit revolted against the unstimulating education offered in the schools of those days. Thus, his resolve was fulfilled in a place set amidst a rural area where he felt that Nature herself would

[28] H. B. Mukherjee, op. cit. p. 16.

[29] Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Santiniketan—Visva-Bharati*, Vol. 1, 1962, p. 5. 'Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadyay was the official biographer of Tagore who came to the Asrama in 1909. The four volume monumental work, *Ravindra Jivani* took over 25 years to complete, cited in Supriya Roy (ed.), *Makers of a Mission: 1901–1941*, 2001, p. 53.

[30] Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, op. cit. p. 5.

[31] Ibid.

[32] RNT, 'Asramer rup o bikash', RR, Vol. 14, 1991, pp. 221–238.

[33] RNT, *My Reminiscences*, op. cit. pp. 28–32.

bring up the children with a little help from him. 'Fortunately for me I had a place ready to my hand where I could begin my work'.[34]

3.4 The Cardinals of the Asrama

Let us identify some of the key elements of this asrama of Tagore's ideas in his words. 'At this distance in time it is difficult to visualize with any degree of historical accuracy what the hermitage of ancient India was like. The picture…is one of purity and benediction, of joy uninhibited by any hankering after material things. Although born in these later times I carry this picture in my heart. There was a time when I felt strongly drawn to the idea of giving shape to the *tapovana* of my vision, in an educational institution of our days'.[35] On 22 December 1901, Rabindranath started the school, *Brahmacharyashram,*[36] with five students and five teachers who came from diverse backgrounds. Tagore addressed the new entrants to the school initiating them into the way of life that they were to expect. 'The orthodox must have squirmed at this sacrilege, for of the five teachers three were Christians and the third was an Englishman. But that was always Tagore's way—to interpret tradition in his own fashion, to honour the past on his own terms, with the result that he won the support of neither the orthodox, who looked askance at him as an impertinent innovator, nor of the radicals, who considered him too ancient. He had to stand alone—a position ideal for a poet but inconvenient for a reformer who needed money and men for his institution. Even his admirers and well-wishers were inclined to believe that the school was at best a poet's whim'.[37]

Initially, the students of the *Brahmacharyashram* did not pay any fees and the teachers who joined Tagore lived with the students and partook of the same food. Rabindranath's wife, Mrinalini Devi, looked after the feeding of the students, but this arrangement did not last long—even before a year was out, she died (23 November 1902). The school went through many rough patches—not enough students, not enough teachers or teachers who did not fulfil Tagore's ideals; instead of freedom of the students, there were too many rules and regulations at one point of time and the asrama suffered always from the paucity of resources even in providing adequate food. But at great odds Tagore persisted in this 'whim' as he considered the school his life's *sadhana* (a mission)—he was realizing a dream and an ideal and he saw the school as a medium of creative expression with which he worked for the good of his people.

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[34] RNT, My School, *Personality*, EWRT2, op. cit. p. 396.

[35] RNT, 'Asrama Education', Introduction *to Tagore*, 1997, p. 10.

[36] In 1925, the name of the school was changed to Patha Bhavana by which it is known till today. Around 1910, the school became coeducational with the admission of girl students.

[37] Krishana Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore*: *A Biography*, 2008, p. 206.

Who is the central figure in the asrama? 'I have visualized the guru (the preceptor) at the very heart and centre of the *tapovana*. He is a man and no machine. He is actively human because his main concern is to help humanity to realise its goal….This association with a mind perpetually awake is the most valuable element of education in an asrama, and that value does not lie in the subjects of study, in paraphernalia or in methods'.[38] He was fortunate in having found such men though not always when he wanted; some came because of him often without any remuneration to give of themselves. Tagore conceived of the teacher as being sensitive and responsive to the call of children and not be at pains to prove their superiority but be a joyous partner in the growth and development of the children. Rabindranath in his autobiography has described how he used to imitate his teachers on coming home after school; he would cane the inert wooden bars of the verandah railing imagining them to be disobedient students: 'I have since realized how much easier it is to acquire the style than the substance of teaching. Without effort I had assimilated all the impatience, short temper, partiality, injustice displayed by my teachers, to the exclusion of the rest of their teaching'.[39]

It is around the teacher that the asrama was organized with the teacher imparting and generating knowledge that would kindle the imagination and creative forces within the children. During the first decade of the school, the school had a quick turnover of teachers and fluctuating number of students; the situation changed for the better from the second decade onwards. The following description of Tagore's school in 1913 is significant: 'He began with five or six boys and there are now nearly 200. He will not allow more than ten boys in a class, believing that a teacher cannot give proper attention to more. The teaching staff number 22. The cost to the parents is not more than 18 rupees a month, or a little more than £1 for each boy, which covers everything—boarding, tuition, medical attendance and laundry'.[40]

Why should the asrama be situated in a forest or away from the city? '… children are near neighbours of the world of nature. They do not seek their repose in an easy chair. Whenever the opportunity arises, they take their vacation in the spreading branches of a tree. The primal energy of life is silently restive deep in the heart of nature. This is the motive force that actuates the heart of the child'.[41] Apart from Tagore's sentiments about the claustrophobic atmosphere of cities and urban spaces and his longing for the openness of wide spaces, he harboured a much deeper conviction about nature in its primeval form. '[Here] men found no barrier between their lives and the grand life that permeates the universe. The forest entered into a close living relationship with their work and leisure with their daily necessities and contemplations'.[42] Rabindranath added in another essay, 'We have come

[38] RNT, 'Asrama Education', op. cit. p. 13.

[39] RNT, *My Reminiscences*, op. cit. p. 29.

[40] Interview of Tagore by the Special Commissioner of *The Christian Commonwealth*, 21 May, 1913, EWRT2, op. cit. p. 616.

[41] RNT, 'Asrama Education' op. cit. p. 11.

[42] RNT, 'Religion of the Forest', *Creative Unity*, EWRT2 op. cit. pp. 511–512.

into this world to accept it, not merely to know it. We may become powerful with knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy. …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. …We know all children are lovers of the dust; their whole body and mind thirst for sunlight and air as flowers do. They are never in a mood to refuse the constant invitation to establish direct communication which comes to their senses from the universe'.[43]

What is education and its goals? 'What do you mean by education? It means the full awakening of vitality. And vitality means constant progress towards genuine interests'.[44] Again and again, Tagore talked about the objectives of education being consonant with full realization of the entire purpose of human life. The terms 'education' and 'life' were inseparably associated in Tagore's educational theory and practice. A full life was one that was in full sympathy with all forms of existence, inanimate and animate; it was also dynamic. Education for a full life should be related to society where education was an organic continuation of the life of the society deriving its content, substance and inspiration from the social life at large. 'The object of education is to give man the unity of truth'.

By collating Tagore's ideas of the nature and objectives of education we can arrive at certain defining aspects, remarkable from the point of view of Tagore not being a theoretician in education per se though he proved himself to be a consummate one with his practice of education at both the school and higher levels. We can identify certain aims of education as conceived by Tagore. Tagore stressed on the (1) **physical fitness**[45] of a child as a prerequisite of mental fitness. This is apparent from his countless writings right from the earliest essay, Sikshar Herpher.

Like Rousseau, he advocated the free intermingling of a child with nature through play and exploration as nature nourishes the body, gives happiness of the mind and satisfies the natural impulses of childhood. L. K. Elmhirst with Tagore while in Argentina had written in details the advice he received on the value and significance of 'motion' or 'kinesis' in education, a remarkable exposition, from Tagore before he embarked on his own institution, Dartington Hall in Britain. Tagore had said as recorded by Elmhirst:

> '…[the] a function of the body [is] not merely to carry out vital functions… All our limbs have their own power to express. …In the process of thinking there are two stages: the act of thought itself and the process of giving to that thought appropriate form or shape expressed in **rhythm of movement** [emphasis added]. Children need the opportunity to give expression of their sentiments through perfect and graceful movements of the body. …have walking classes once a week by means of which tedium could be broken and the child becomes ready to receive and digest. …Let them write while out walking, let them do their thinking aloud. …I used to encourage them to watch the Santal women filing by with their pottery of water vessels, to listen to the singing of the cartmen… By demanding

[43] RNT, My School, *Personality*, ibid. pp. 390–391.

[44] RNT quoted in H. B. Mukherjee, op. cit., p. 111.

[45] For details see H. B. Mukherjee, ibid. pp. 252–253.

> this kind of coordination of body and mind, eye and ear together, the exercise could become more and more complex and interesting. …The Greeks were probably aware of the need for this inter-relationship for they cultivated a perfect harmony of body and mind. They linked teaching with music and games'.[46]

(2) The **intellectual aims**[47] of education have been touched upon in the discussion of the essay, Sikshar Herpher, and will be elaborated and reiterated here for a fuller understanding. Tagore did not approve of bookish knowledge based on recall from memory. He encouraged his students to undertake reading different kinds of books in the course of their stay in the asrama. He saw a direct relation between language and thinking and that is why he laid stress on mother tongue as the medium of instruction for this aided and enhanced absorption of knowledge thereby making it possible to be used when required. He wanted the students to develop **independence in thinking**, to be able to **critically appraise** facts and ideas, and to understand their use or **relevance**. The power of **imagination** to Tagore was the necessary companion to **thinking** and it was the combination of these two that led to the release of **creative energy**. Tagore believed that these forces of thinking and imagination had to be kindled from a very young age if the young were to grow into complete persons. The cycle of seasons, the life cycle of plants and animal life, the course of rivers, the value of natural resources—in other words, the wonder of encounter with the vastness and bounty of nature and its many aspects, took the place of a teacher for a child. Nature provided opportunity for direct learning. **Use** of knowledge and **generating** knowledge were two aspects of the intellectual goal on which Tagore emphasized. Only when children comprehended fully, the features of their own surroundings did they gain the confidence to radiate outwards to larger domains and generate new knowledge and did not have to depend upon knowledge coming to them second-hand.

(3) The **ethical and spiritual aims** of education according to Tagore were not to be confused with the conventional idea of morality, but convictions born out of the urge to be part of a harmonious whole in which constituent parts worked in tandem. Tagore was a deeply spiritual man who from childhood had been exposed not to conventional religious ideas but to the sayings of the Upanishads that upheld monotheistic beliefs. He had no faith in direct moral instruction or in the value of rites and rituals but in the internalization of religion and morality. In discussing the ethical issues of education, the words of Tagore are very evocative. He was deeply sensitive to the importance of human fellow feeling and sociability as indispensable equipments of a truly educated person. He condemned the system of education that erected barriers between society and us, 'the fundamental purpose of education is not merely to enrich ourselves through the fullness of knowledge, but also to establish the bond of love and friendship between man and man'.[48] This love persuaded the educated to establish bonds of kinship with those who

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[46] L. K. Elmhirst, 'Movement in Education', EWRT4, 2007, pp. 629–634.

[47] H. B. Mukherjee, op. cit. pp. 253–257.

[48] RNT, 'Bharatiya Visvavidyalayer Adarsa' Satyendranath Ray (ed.) op. cit. pp. 268–269.

were not as educated as they were or else their education would remain incomplete. He expanded further on the idea of kinship with the poor and the lowly to include the whole of humanity or mankind. Education was an organic part of the life of society and needed to be broadly based on community life. Educational system and the life of the people were to intermingle so that one vitalized the other.

This brings us to another of his firm conviction about the futility of a limited nationalistic view or of cultural isolation from the rest of the country and the world. Tagore eloquently stated, 'this is an age of collective culture. The culture that will not align itself with this great collective cultural enterprise and will court spinsterhood through the vanity of aristocracy shall perish fruitlessly'.[49] Tagore absorbed ideas from all over the world in order to establish his position on education—be it ancient history of the Western world, the practices of the modern West and the progressive East.

The two themes of truth and beauty returned again and again as the leit motifs in Tagore's writings where he talked about the aims of education or of man realizing the fullness of his being. Both these themes stemmed from his deep ethical concerns. Beauty was a source of joy and creativity sprung from this sense of joy and in its turn generated creativity, and man was ever alive to the idea of creating beauty in his quest for truth. Beauty came through art and music, and Tagore in his infinite wisdom advocated these as essential components of education and put the same into practice in his asrama school.

(4) Another important aim of education was to **spread the ambit of education, so the masses** could also avail and become true citizens of the country and participate in its growth and development. According to Tagore, the problem of social reconstruction and national regeneration were fundamentally problems of education, in fact, education of the vast masses of people who made the nation. Tagore pleaded the cause of mass education from his earliest prose writings during the 1880s and he persisted in this till the last years of his life. 'In my view, the imposing tower of misery which today rests on the heart of India has its sole foundation on the absence of education'.[50] 'The prosperity of a country depends upon the education of the masses…'.[51] Education must be of a universal character, disseminated among the entire people and not confined to any section.

What was life in the asrama like? 'The asrama tends to become a creation of the inmates every time they conduct their own affairs in fellowship and cooperation. I have all along devoutly wished for the emergence of this ever-active spirit of cooperation….Lack of facilities or want of paraphernalia is no problem in the early stages of education. On the contrary, it is desirable that the child should learn the habit of austerity early in life. To pamper the child or indulge him by making

[49] RNT, 'Sikshar Milan', *Siksha*, RR, Vol. 16, 2000, pp. 303–316.

[50] RNT quoted in H.B. Mukherjee, op. cit. p. 302.

[51] Ibid. p. 303.

things readily available to him, is to spoil the child. …Where external aid is inconspicuous, it becomes possible to give proper exercise to the natural energy of body and mind. That is what stimulates the initiative to create and improvise'.[52] Tagore denounces material things in the following words, 'The impertinence of material things is extremely old. The revelation of the spirit in man is truly modern. I am on its side, for I am modern'.[53] We have an early description in W. W. Pearson's account of life in the Asrama: 'The boys are awakened before sunrise by the singing of one of the poet's songs by a band of singers. As soon as they get up they go for their morning bath which they take by the wells which have been sunk in different parts of the grounds. After their bath they have 15 min set apart for silent worship after which they chant some verses of the Upanishads. After some light food the classes begin at about 7 o'clock. …After a meal at 11.30, the boys stay in their rooms and work at their lessons, the teachers sitting with them to give help if needed. Classes begin in the afternoon at 2 o'clock and continue till 4.30 or 5 o'clock. In the cool of the evening, football is played while some of the boys go for walks. At sunset they have 15 min for silence and chanting of evening verses. Some of the boys teach in the night school… Before the evening meal there is an hour which is devoted to some form of entertainment, such as story telling by one of the teachers, a lantern lecture or some amusement is got up by the boys themselves'.[54] From the descriptions of some of the early students, we get similar accounts of the asrama way of life, notably among these are the descriptions written by noted litterateur, Pramathanath Bishi, and Sudhi Ranjan Das who later became the Chief Justice of India after independence and also the Vice-Chancellor of Visva-Bharati during the Tagore centenary year.[55]

What did the asrama look like? It is indeed very difficult to imagine today what the asrama looked like in the early days of the school. The following excerpt from his poem, 'Civilization'[56] is evocative of the images in Tagore's mind:

> Give back the wilderness, take away the city –
> Embrace if you will your steel, brick and stone walls
> O newfangled civilization! Cruel all-consuming one,
> Return all sylvan, secluded, shaded and sacred spots
> And traditions of innocence. Come back evenings
> When herds returned suffused in evening light,
> Serene hymns were sung, paddy accepted as alms
> And bark-clothes worn. Rapt in devotion,
> One meditated on eternal truths then single-mindedly.
> No more stone-hearted security or food fit for kings - .

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[52] RNT, 'Asrama Education', op. cit. pp. 11–13.

[53] RNT, 'Autobiographical', *Talks in China*, EWRT2, op. cit. pp. 581–602.

[54] W.W. Pearson, *Shantiniketan: The Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore*, 1916, pp. 53–55.

[55] Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindranath O* Santiniketan, 1975 (2nd Edition); Sudhi Ranjan Das, *Amader Santiniketan* 1959; Hirendranath Datta, *Santiniketaner Ek* Jug, 1980.

[56] RNT, 'Sabhyatar prati' from *Chaitali* (1896), tr. Fakrul Alam, as 'Civilization', Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty (eds.), *The Essential Tagore*, 2011, p. 223.

We'd rather breathe freely and discourse openly!
We'd rather get back the strength that we had,
Burst through all barriers that hem us in and feel
The boundless universe's pulsating heartbeat!

The purchased land at Santiniketan was laid out with a few buildings, one or two at the most, a prayer hall and most importantly with a variety of trees, shrubs and creepers in the true spirit of a forest retreat. There is mention in one of Tagore's letters that there were two deer in the asrama,[57] evoking the collective cultural memories of Kalidasa's imagery in *Avijnanam Shakuntalam* and *Raghuvansham*.[58] Devendranath used the place for meditation and rest. Just outside of the asrama were wide open spaces stretching to the horizon dotted with a few palm trees amid the red lateritic soil of the district of Birbhum which is arid with stretches of eroded land; thus, the transformation of even a small area of land into a tree-filled place was an achievement. Trees were planted so that there were avenues (the most famous is the Sal Bithi or avenue of teak) through which Rabindranath could often be seen walking and copses of which the most notable is the Amra Kunja or the mango grove. Apart from these, there were countless other trees, trees providing shade and seasonal flowers and creepers of many kinds. It was as if the asrama was made ready to greet each season as they came with its special signature of flower and fruit—spring with its riot of colours of the flowers; summer with the redolent scents of the mango flowers and fruits; the monsoon with heavy-scented flowers, and winter with the new shimmering leaves that danced in the breeze. These trees and abundant greenery still encase the asrama, embodying the primal teacher, Nature. The few hostels for the students that were more like cottages were situated in the asrama and so were the huts for the teachers. A huge playground on one side of the asrama drew one boundary as did the gates on the other. Clearly there was no electricity in the asrama. The prayer hall[59] was very important to the asrama. It was called *mandir* or temple—asramites would gather here for weekly and occasional prayer meetings that were conducted in the Brahmo style with a preceptor reading a piece of educative prose, chanting Upanisadic verses and a choir singing songs composed by Tagore.

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[57] RNT letter to Kunjalal Ghosh, the first appointed administrator of the school, December 1902 cited in Kathleen M.O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore*: *Poet as Educator*, 2012, (2nd Edition), p. 141.

[58] Kalidasa, flourished 5th century, India, Sanskrit poet and dramatist, the author of the two epics mentioned, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/310169/Kalidasa.

[59] The *mandir* or prayer hall is a delicate building built with an iron frame having coloured glass panels and doors that opened on all four sides as if to let the winds and light from every direction to enter it. It is not a conventional temple, and the prayer meetings are held once a week and on special occasions. It was the duty of the students to prepare the prayer hall for the weekly prayer by drawing *alpana* or floor decoration; arrange flowers and welcome the preceptor. This is followed even today. Since 1910, Tagore started the practice of observing Christ's birth in the prayer hall.

The class rooms were under the shade of trees; the teacher sat on a slightly higher level (*bedi*) while the students sat around the teacher in a semicircle on mats they carried along with their books. Each shade was sufficiently distant so that one class did not disturb the other. The students ran from one class 'site' to another in the time gap between classes. Teachers had their designated sites so that the students knew where they had to go.

The groves were for special functions—the spring festival was held there. A description of the asrama necessitates the description of the custom of welcoming seasons that was a part of Tagore's education content. There is a folk adage in Bengal that in the 12 months of a year, there are 13 festivals—largely the festivals are religious in nature. Rabindranath created a canon of seasonal festivals which were unique. They broke away from the largely religious sentiments associated with traditional festivals thus creating a public space without bias or barrier. There are festivals for the seasons like, spring (*Vasantotsava*), monsoon (*Varshamangal*); festival of planting trees (*Vriksharopana*); and the *Pous Mela* held during the winter months and numerous other festivals like celebrating the Bengali new year (*Navavarsha*); the foundation day of the Brahmo Samaj (*Maghotsava*). The particular Sriniketan[60] festivals are *Halakarshana* (the ploughing festival), *Silpotsava* (celebrating the implements of the craftspersons) and *Magh Mela* (the rural fair). The system of self-help that had existed in the asrama was reinvigorated after Mahatma Gandhi wanted all the asrama work (including cooking and sweeping) to be done by the students. This was when he had come to Santiniketan after his return to India from South Africa with the students of the Phoenix School; the students stayed on for about 5 months. This intensive drive for self-help was initiated on 10 March 1915; since then, this day is commemorated every year as *Gandhi Punyaha* with the students and teachers undertaking the menial tasks of the university.

The festivals of Santiniketan and Sriniketan are unique—unique in their conception, execution and in intent. They also ensure participation of many. Tagore combined various elements of ancient traditions, traditional customs and secular principles in the design of the festivals. In the *Vriksharopana,* Tagore invoked the five elements (earth, water, air, fire and sky) to make the earth receive the sapling. He used the Upanisadic verses to invoke the divine—the protohistorical heritage of the Upanisads predates what we know as Hindu traditions. The decoration of the stage or the venue was as natural as possible with the flowers, leaves and plants of the asrama as adornment. The trees were used as the backdrop of the stage in many cases with the open sky above.

Rabindranath wrote many songs for each of the festivals and seasons that were celebrated by the students and teachers of the institution. The songs were accompanied by dance performed by students and teachers. In fact, Tagore created a new dance form as he did for his music—his dance genre is called *Rabindra Nritya* and

[60] Sriniketan is the other campus of Visva-Bharati in which the programme of Rural Reconstrucion was organized; discussed in Chap. 5.

his music is called *Rabindra Sangit*. Music, dance and art were essential elements of his education plan.

What was the **curriculum and method** used in the school? Tagore developed them in his school with the same breadth of vision as he had formulated the aims of education. He saw these as the instruments through which the educational aims were realized. The curriculum included all aspects of human life—physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual on the one hand and on the other, individual, social and utilitarian. He advocated a fullness of experience for children so that they acquired knowledge from multiple sources as well as from the subconscious. Tagore put forward the idea of subconscious learning among children as being of immense value in their cognitive process. 'I believe that children have their subconscious mind more active than their conscious intelligence. A vast quantity of the most important of our lessons has been taught to us through this…and a perpetual stream of idea and experience flows into the child's ever sensitive mind from Nature and life'.[61] He had a grievance against the prevailing curriculum that allowed the students to somehow pass through an examination and get into a job—he viewed such curriculum circumscribed and mercenary in nature. He conceived instead of a curriculum that would have the inbuilt ideas of **surplus**, **variety**, **depth** and **utility**. He wanted the curriculum to be related to daily life by which students would be able to address the situations that they encountered. Tagore saw curriculum as a system of activities interrelated with each other working as a gestalt where nothing was extra-curricular. The curriculum was designed to provide an intellectual and imaginative horizon in which children could roam about—much wider in scope than the bare necessity. 'He had no curriculum of studies; he had instead a curriculum of life. The emphasis was on learning to live rather than living to learn'.[62]

Let us go to the writing of Tagore on this aspect:

> In my own school my children come around me. I sit with them on the same level, very often in the open air. You know, I have open-air classes because I suffered, when I was young, from the closeness of the classrooms, the deadness of the walls and everything which was dull and gloomy and colourless…I had three classes under me….All of a sudden they would feel restless, and I would allow them …to climb up the trees, or do something very irregular. … I try to make my relationship with them quite natural and sympathetic… I do not make lessons very regular – not the same class, at the same place, at the same hour. I give them surprises. …We have a mango grove. It is full of shadows, and in the summer, full of the beautiful perfume of the mango blossoms and there are innumerable birds and moths and all kinds of insects… I allow them sometimes to leave their lessons and to look more closely at the things which attract their eyes. Very often they call my attention to some strange birds that have come and perched on the bough… right in the midst of their lessons. And then I talk to them about that bird…this constant movement of their mind is necessary for them. It is the method which nature had adopted in her own school for the young. … When we are young we assimilate without our

[61] RNT quoted in H. B. Mukherjee, op. cit. p. 275.

[62] Hirendranath Datta, 'Lest We Forget', *Visva-Bharati News*, Silver Jubilee Number, p. 38.

> knowing it. … But directly we take them from their natural environment of life and put them into an artificial surrounding, their mind is closed…they cannot get their nourishment. … …the proper method of education – to allow children to come to their paths of knowledge almost casually and suddenly, and then let them…ask questions of their own accord. … through constant curiosity their mind becomes more and more active.[63]

The passage suggests that Tagore was trying out various methods of teaching young children within a structure founded on the concept of **freedom**—the freedom to **explore**, to **know** and **internalize**. He was also trying to find ways, by which he could arouse **curiosity**, kindle **imagination** and develop powers of **observation**. He was sensitive to the child's need for movement—movement from place to place and from topic to topic; he did not interpret this as 'disturbance' or 'indiscipline' on the child's part. In this, the ever changing nature with its many shades, hues and scents was his teacher—he understood that children thrive best in movement and change. Tagore differentiated between a child's way and adult's way of learning—an adult learned through 'concentration of mind' on essentials, choosing the useful and rejecting the rest as undesirable while a child on the other hand learnt in Nature's way through 'dispersion of mind' with the aid of their whole body in which the senses were alive and active and absorbent.[64] Introducing the study of English to the children, Tagore suggested to start with the verb as the verb represented the dynamic aspect of a language and could be easily comprehensible to the child who was naturally drawn to activity. He also suggested that the comparative method in contrast to the direct method was a better way of teaching a language other than mother tongue—in this context, teaching English through Bengali. This would help the child to enter straight into the language rather than slowly building up a vocabulary and constructing sentences. Also, the skills of the mother language could be transferred to the foreign language. However, when there were British teachers teaching English, the direct method was followed.[65]

Tagore believed in the internalization and absorption of knowledge through thinking and imagination that was evident right from the very first writings—we see how carefully he constructed the argument in support of his beliefs. He did not view the curriculum as certain subjects but in terms of certain activities to be undertaken—for him, completing the syllabus was not as important as achieving the goals set for each subject in each class. He had devolved the power of school management to a body of teachers who coordinated the administration and management; Tagore was one of the teachers. There were different subject coordinators and teachers would report about the progress of the students, their courses and other details once a month.

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[63] RNT, 'Addresses in Singapore and Malay: To School Children', *Lectures and Addresses*, EWRT4, op. cit. pp. 564–570.

[64] RNT, 'The Schoolmaster', *Modern Review*, 1924, EWRT3, 1996, pp. 504–509.

[65] For details on Tagore's methods of teaching English, see RNT, 'Ingreji Sekha' 'Ingreji Sekhar Arambha'; 'Anuvad Charcha', *Santiniketan*, May to December 1919. His deep and serious concern for the teaching and learning of English is spelt out in these articles and in his texts that he created for the learning of English.

Tagore advocated the **activity principle**—children's senses actively absorb impressions of the environs triggering observation and thinking leaving a stable impression on the mind. The school organized frequent walking tours, picnics and excursions. Tagore was averse to bookish knowledge but an avid supporter of the **habit of reading**. He rued the paucity of vernacular literature and he himself wrote countless volumes for children trying to fill the vacuum. He persuaded his colleagues also to write small, interesting but topical books for the students. He made available translations of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Browning to the students; there were books on local landscape; flora and fauna; stars; scientific principles manifested in daily life; tales of history and mythology. Reading was an important activity in the school as was storytelling.

We get a perspective of students from the following memoir:

> My father sent me to Santiniketan at the behest of my elder brother. The discipline in my village school was maintained by caning, twisting of the ears, wearing the donkey cap, doing sit-ups – as if all these were companions to our text books. Santiniketan in contrast was like a new world with not a trace of those disciplining methods. Here there was play, singing, leaping and having our classes under the trees. We the students did most of our own work, washing our plates, glasses etc., our clothes and cleaning of our rooms. We were also given our little gardens that we had to tend. The method of imparting education was quite different. As a student of class IV, I was reading books written by Tagore, poems and prose, storybooks and in English I read *Sindbad the Sailor*, *Alladin and the Wonderful Lamp*, *Robin Hood* etc. The teachers would read with us to explain the meaning of words and on completion of one book I would start another. Also, there was a system that a student could study any subject in the grade suitable to his level – e.g., a higher class for literature and a lower class for mathematics. The system of examination too was quite innovative; the teachers would give out the questions and we could sit wherever we wanted; there was no system of invigilation. I had tried to take advantage of the situation but was rebuked by my classmate that this would be breaking the trust that the teachers had placed on us. This little moral lesson meant a great deal to me. The little children did not study during dusk; they would all gather round a teacher who would tell stories and stimulate our imagination. (Translation author)[66]

From the above account, it is possible to set down some of the principles of the curriculum that Tagore developed over the years. Tagore did not believe in giving children a diluted curriculum sweetened by romance and make-believe. He had faith in a richness of mental fare presented in a natural and spontaneous manner. He desired that courses of study should contain a good amount of **mental vitamins** that would enliven the mind. This was the idea of surplus.

Tagore was deeply concerned that the curriculum in most schools was unrealistic and failed to reflect the needs and conditions, patterns of life, and the values of the familiar domestic and social life of the pupils or the urgent problems of the country and society which he believed resulted in incomplete education and rendered the so-called educated people to experience a disconnect from the rest of the society. The educated were neither aware of the realities nor interested in discovering

[66] Satyendranath Jana, 'Amader Santiniketan', *Rabindra Viksha*, Vol. 53, December 2012, pp. 37–43.

them. He was very keen that his curriculum addressed those issues and found ways by which real connections between the educated and the society could be forged and there could be a **harmonious link between people**. In order to achieve this, the material for the textbooks was drawn from direct sources. Also, the students undertook Region Study through which they collected flora and other materials from the region including folk tales, songs, items of local craft.

Learning by doing, a corollary of the activity principle, on which Tagore had great faith. He believed in education through participation of students in creative and constructive activities of art, dance, and music; reading of literature and dramatic performances; functions and festivals; training in craft and handicraft and through social service concurrent with academic learning. The students also participated in organizational and self-government activities.

Joy of learning was another most valuable principle in Tagore's educational method. Joy was important for the wholesome growth of children in body and mind. Tagore wrote in a letter, 'It is time to reveal to mankind the true note of its fulfillment…. It is the note of Beauty, the song of Joy, the hymn of praise of the inexpressible grandeur of the sky and the light, the music of the rolling waves of the Ocean of the spirit…. The joy of consciousness…'.[67] In the same letter he wrote, 'Work wedded to joy is work at its best'. In Tagore's words, 'This then seemed to be my mission, to have a school where I could make children happy and give them as much freedom as I possibly could'.[68]

An account of the disciplinary aspects of the school will not be out of place here. Tagore had an interesting attitude towards discipline and aims of education. He felt that if our aim was to make the student independent in thinking, questing knowledge and being self driven, then the disciplinary methods would have to differ from when our aim was to make the student obedient, uncritically accepting others' statements and acting only as their assistants. Mention has already been made of the self-government system practised in the school. Self-government was an innovative system introduced in the school right from its early days. Students would elect their monitors who would take the responsibility of maintaining discipline and student welfare in the school with the help and assistance of the teachers. This system was unique for those times. Through this system, Tagore aimed to make students partners in the creation of the idea of the school, in the atmosphere of freedom and joy and in becoming organically linked with the school. 'To teach students leadership and self-government, the internal management of the school is left to the students. Every Tuesday the students elect a captain for a week. He is the chief magistrate. Every house elects its own leader. The leaders take note of acts of misbehavior in class and outside. The cases are not brought before Tagore or before the teachers, but before the students' court which sits in the evening on appointed days'.[69] He had strong reservations about brutal discipline stating that

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[67] RNT letter to Ajit Kumar Chakravarti, *Visva-Bharati Patrika*, 1942.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit. p. 159.

teachers who were harsh were actually displaying their own weakness or incapacity to touch the hearts of children. He saw harshness as an unequal power equation between the teacher and the taught, whereas forgiveness is the virtue of the strong. Conversely, for Tagore, freedom was more important than disciplining a child. He felt that negation of freedom was the negation of life and growth. An illustration of Tagore's idea of freedom will elucidate this point. When the students had questioned his denial of permission to their participation in the Nationalist struggle, Tagore had replied, 'This Santiniketan will fail if it fetters your mind or makes you fear…. Today is the day of my victory, because my students have said today freely and bravely that I am hopelessly in the wrong. I do not admit that I am in the wrong. But I want you to have the courage to say so, if that is your conviction. May Santiniketan always give you that freedom and courage'.[70]

Rounding off with a parable:
Rabindranath's beautiful parable, *A Parrot's Training* (1918),[71] excerpts of which are given here, is self-explanatory.

> Once upon a time there was a bird. It was ignorant. It sang alright but never recited scriptures. Said the Raja to himself: 'Ignorance is costly in the long run. For fools consume as much food as their betters, and yet give nothing in return.' He called his nephews to his presence and told them that the bird should have a sound schooling.
>
> Pundits were summoned, and at once went to the root of the matter. They decided that the ignorance of birds was due to their natural habit of living in poor nests. Therefore, according to the Pundits, the first thing necessary for the bird's education was a suitable cage. A golden cage was built with gorgeous decorations. Crowds came to see it from all parts of the world. 'Culture, capture and caged!' exclaimed some in a rapture of ecstasy.
>
> The Pundit sat down to educate the bird. He said: 'Text books can never be too many for our purpose!' The nephews brought together an enormous crowd of scribes. They copied from books, and copied from copies, till the manuscripts were piled high to an unreachable height. Men murmured in amazement: 'Oh the tower of culture, egregiously high! The end is lost in the clouds!' Men were employed in large numbers and supervisors were still more numerous.
>
> The Raja at length, being desirous of seeing with his own eyes how his Education Department busied itself with the little bird, made his appearance in the great Hall of Learning. From the gate rose the sound of conch shells and gongs, horns, bugles and trumpets, cymbals, drums and kettle-drums, tomtoms, tambourines, flutes, fifes, barrel-organs and bagpipes. The pundits began chanting mantras with their topmost voices, while [the others] loudly raised a round of cheers.
>
> The nephews smiled and said: 'Sire, what do you think of it all?'
>
> The Raja said: 'It does seem so fearfully like a sound principle of Education!'
>
> Mightily pleased, the Raja was about to remount his elephant, when the fault-finder from behind the bush, cried out: 'Maharaja, have you seen the bird?' Turning back he asked the pundits about the method they followed in instructing the bird. It was shown to him. He was immediately impressed. The method was so stupendous that the bird looked ridiculously unimportant in comparison. The Raja was satisfied. As for any complaint from the bird itself, that simply could not be expected. Its throat was so completely choked with the leaves from the books that it could neither whistle nor whisper.

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[70] RNT quoted in H.B. Mukherjee, op. cit. p. 374.

[71] RNT, *A Parrot's Training*, EWRT2, op. cit. pp. 272–274.

The bird thus crawled on, duly and properly to the safest verge of inanity. Nevertheless, nature occasionally triumphed over training, and when the morning light peeped into the bird's cage it sometimes fluttered it wings and pitifully pecked at its bars with its feeble beak. The blacksmith forged an iron chain and the bird's wings were clipped.

The bird died. Nobody had the least notion how long ago this had happened. The fault-finder was the first man to spread the rumour. The Raja called his nephews and asked them. 'My dear nephews, what is this that we hear?'

The nephews said: 'Sire, the education of the bird has been completed.'

'Does it hop?' the Raja enquired.

'Never!' said the nephews.

'Does it fly?'

'No.'

'Bring me the bird,' said the Raja.

The bird was brought to him. The Raja poked its body with his finger. Only its inner stuffing of book leaves rustled.

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Chapter 4
Visva-Bharati: The Transnational Centre of Education

Yatra visvam bhavatyekanidam

The motto of Visva-Bharati; literal meaning of the Sanskrit phrase 'Where the world makes its home in a single nest'.

Abstract Tagore started a school in 1901 and in 1918 he wrote, '…the Santiniketan School should form a link between India and the world…the epoch of narrow nationalism is coming to an end…. The first flag of victory of Universal Man shall be planted there'. This was the beginning of Visva-Bharati that finally encapsulated the school and university with its many programmes and courses under one unique integrated system. The university was a logical progression in his philosophy of education. The central idea of the university was for the east to offer to the west the best of its wealth and take from the west its knowledge. This was indeed a novel idea as the country was yet to have its own full-fledged universities. Tagore envisioned the university as the seat for research that would generate and also dispense knowledge. Tagore established the university in Santiniketan where he had founded his school. He wanted the university to offer education that was enmeshed with the Indian way of life so that knowledge grew out of the culture, society, history, literature, geography, economy, science and flora and fauna of the country. From this sense of nationalism, we see Tagore evolving into an internationalist based on equal terms of fellowship and amity between the east and the west. He shared his quest for such a centre of learning with the ideas of several noted international pedagogues. Tagore saw world problems and national interests as interrelated, and he felt that internationalism was the inner spirit of the modern age.

Keywords Exchange of knowledge between east and west • The beginnings of internationalism • Art, music and education • Transnational links and educational movements

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> I have formed the nucleus of an International University in India, as one of the best means of promoting mutual understanding between the East and the West.[1]

4.1 The Beginnings of the Idea of a University

The year was 1918; Tagore wrote to Rathindranath, his son, from Los Angeles, '… the Santiniketan school should form a link between India and the world—there has to be founded the centre for cultivating universal manhood—the epoch of narrow nationalism is coming to its end—the grand ceremony of the great union of the nations of the world shall have its beginnings on the fields of Bolpur. It is my first desire to build that spot as one transcending the barrier of nationalistic geography. The first flag of victory of the Universal Man shall be planted there'.[2] In December 1918, the foundation of a building was laid signalling the birth of the university. This building was called Visva-Bharati that literally meant the 'world in India' or world and India. That this idea was fomenting in his mind for some time was evident from the many letters and essays in which he expressed his belief that a university was a logical progression in his philosophy of education. It would give concrete shape to his ideas that it was possible for the east to offer to the west the best of its wealth and take from the west its knowledge. Such an idea had never been put forward either in public debate or in discussion on university education in India. In drawing up a scheme for university education in India, the syllabus and the system of British and Western institutions had been followed. As mentioned earlier, prior to 1918, there was no teaching university in India; the universities in the three Presidencies (Calcutta, Madras and Bombay) were administrative in nature controlling affiliated colleges and their teaching–learning. This underwent transformation after 1920 on the adoption of the report of the Sadler Commission in which introduction of teaching in the university was recommended. Therefore, Tagore's university offering teaching and learning right from the beginning was one of the first of its kind. More importantly, it was unique in its conception of its teaching and its schemes for research both envisaged as activities in the fields of generation and dispersion of knowledge. Also central to Tagore's vision was the idea that the university would create a meeting place of the east and the west whose peoples had previously only met through coercion but never in the fellowship of intellect. 'We are building up our institution upon the ideal of the spiritual unity of all races. I hope it is going to be a great meeting place for individuals from all countries who believe in divine humanity … I

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[1] Rabindranath Tagore (henceforth RNT), *An Eastern University*, *The English Writings of Rabindranath* Tagore, Volume 2, (henceforth EWRT2), p. 557.

[2] RNT's letter to Rathindranath, 11 October 1916, *Chithipatra*, Volume 2, pp. 55–56. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation*, remarks, 'Anyone who has been to Los Angeles or the west coast of the United States would know that the idea was born in an appropriate place'. 2011, p. 112.

represent in my institution an ideal of brotherhood where men of different countries and different languages can come together…'.[3]

When dealing with Rabindranath and his ideas, it is a sound strategy to go to his writings as from a review of these; we can identify some of the key essays from which we are able to derive the answers to questions that naturally arise in our minds. Some of the key essays that have been used in understanding Visva-Bharati university are, 'The Centre of Indian Culture' (1919); 'An Eastern University' (1921); the address delivered on the foundation day of Visva-Bharati Society (1919); the series of significant letters (May–June 1922) exchanged between Tagore and the historian, Jadunath Sarkar; 'The Visva-Bharati Ideal' (1923); the series of articles included in *Visva-Bharati*; his address on the eve of his departure to South America and a few lectures and addresses that will be referred subsequently.[4] The questions raised are as follows: What are the factors that led to the genesis of the university? What were its ideals, aims and objectives? How was the university organized in real terms? Was there any dissent? What were Tagore's links to international movements in education? After Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for his English translation of the poems of *Gitanjali*, he was perforce in the gaze of the world; besides, his wayfaring nature took him all over the world. During this time, he developed his sense of internationalism or universalism that was not matched by any other personality in the west or east during that time. Over the years, Tagore truly became a world citizen transcending the limited range of a nationalist identity or worldview. Many of the talks referred here were the talks that he delivered in different countries during his international tours.

The poet undertook a significant Euro-American tour during the years 1920–1921 that moulded his internationalism to a great extent; the tremendous reception that he met with placed a responsibility on his shoulders to give of himself to the world. He wrote, 'It made me realize that a great responsibility was laid upon me to seek to bring about a true meeting of the East and the West, beyond the boundaries of politics and race and creed'.[5]

4.2 Preparation of the Clay Mould

The essay, The Centre of Indian Culture, written in English is the first major statement made by Tagore on the Visva-Bharati idea in which he addressed the need for a national system of education founded on the genius and tradition of the country. Between 1919 and 1921, Tagore embarked on fund-raising for Visva-Bharati in

[3] RNT, 'My Educational Mission', *The Modern Review*, June 1931.

[4] RNT, 'The Centre of Indian Culture'; 'An Eastern University', *Creative Unity*, EWRT2; Address on the occasion of the formal inauguration of Visva-Bharati (1919) in *Visva-Bharati*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, (henceforth RR), Volume 14, pp.; Letters between Rabindranath and Jadunath Sarkar, Bikash Chakravarty, *Byahata Sakhya: Rabindranath O Jadunath Sarkar*, 2011; 'The Visva-Bharati Ideal', RNT and C.F. Andrews, *Visva-Bharati*, 1923; RNT 'Yatrar Purvakatha', *Rabindra Rachanabali*, (henceforth RR), Volume 14, 1991, pp. 268–270.

[5] RNT, 'The Visva-Bharati Ideal', RNT and C.F. Andrews, *Visva-Bharati*, op. cit. pp. 9–10.

various parts of India, Europe and America, for which he prepared this talk and he put forward his ideas of Visva-Bharati to the world.[6] He proposed that there should be centres of learning devoted to the study and cultivation of India's heritage of knowledge and culture in an Indian atmosphere under the leadership of scholars drawn from the entire country. 'My suggestion is that we should generate somewhere a centripetal force which will attract and group together from different parts of the land and different ages all our own materials of learning and thus create a complete and moving orb of Indian culture'.[7] Tagore makes five very significant points in this essay:

1. On each race is the duty laid to keep alight its own lamp of mind as its part in the illumination of the world. To break the lamp of any people is to deprive it of its rightful place in the world festival. He who has no light is unfortunate enough, but utterly miserable is he who having it, has been deprived of it or has forgotten all about it.[8]

The feeling of discontent about the state of education in India was gaining ground, and there were signs of a need for a change. A nascent idea of a national education was in the public domain, but it was not revolutionary in character for the people who were acclimatized to the prevalent system of education. The outcome of the national education movement was for Indians to be able to take control of the bodies already set up without, however, making any substantial changes in the content of education being imparted. Also, there was no system of making objective assessment of the policies. At best, the systems that were thought of were imitative in nature and not innovative.

2. India has proved that it has its own mind… The education of India is to enable this mind of India to find out truth, to make this truth its own wherever found and to give expression to it in such a manner as only it can do.[9]

According to Tagore, India had its indigenous system of education that was interwoven with its ethos and life evident in the forest hermitages of yore. The forest was an integral part of life—wisdom and knowledge was sought in the deep forest retreats or on top of mountains amid nature in all its primal beauty. Tagore held up as examples the ancient Buddhist institutions of Nalanda, Taxila and Ujjain as models where scholars had had the opportunity to pursue their studies without restraints based on their own roots of wisdom. '…our [consciousness] is perfect when our consciousness realizes all things as spiritually one with it and therefore capable of giving us joy. For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realizing ourselves through expansion of sympathy and not dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union'.[10]

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[6] Swati Datta, 'Rabindranath Tagore and the Centre of Indian Culture', *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, (henceforth VBQ), Volumes 17 & 18, Nos. 3, 4, 1 & 2, October 2008–September 2009, pp. 3–17.

[7] RNT, 'The Centre of Indian Culture', op. cit. p. 482.

[8] Ibid, p. 469.

[9] Ibid, p. 469.

[10] RNT, 'Religion of the Forest', *Creative Unity*, op.cit. p. 512.

3. …the mind of India has to be concentrated and made conscious of itself and then … accept education from its teachers in the right spirit, judge by its own standard and make use of it by its own creative power…. So when we can bring the scattered minds of India into coordinated activity, they will then become receptive as well as creative…[11]

The universities of the west—Oxford, Cambridge, etc—clouded the Indian imagination about the ideal universities. There was a feeling that India's salvation would lie in amalgamating the best of each to create an ideal university on Indian soil. This according to Tagore was a major problem. Tagore's thought that those Western universities were organic parts of their societies was overlooked, and there was only one aspiration, for a university to spring up, complete and fully grown from its inception on Indian soil. Tagore believed that India would have to abandon this desire and instead develop universities that were in harmony and had links with Indian society and its ethos. Indian universities would have to find and develop their areas of focus for generating a corpus of knowledge and share it with the world; from this would grow the ability to take from others not in mere imitation but through internalization. It was not in the infrastructure that efforts had to be made but in defining our culture and focusing our intellectual activities on its development. Universities should be an outcome of the community's social consciousness and should be places where people could come together. '…in the present age with its facility of communication, geographical barriers have almost lost their reality, and the great federation of men, which is waiting either to find its true scope or to break asunder in a final catastrophe, is not a meeting of individuals, but of various human races. … The first step towards realization is to create opportunities for revealing the different people to one another. We must find some meeting ground. … One of such places is the university where we can work together in a common pursuit of truth; share together our common heritage…'[12]

4. …in education, the most important factor must be the inspiring atmosphere of creative activity. And therefore the primary function of our University should be the constructive work of knowledge. Men should be brought together and full scope given to them for their work of intellectual exploration and creation; and the teaching should be like the overflow of the spring of culture, spontaneous and inevitable.[13]

In Tagore's scheme, education primarily had dual functions—knowledge generation and knowledge dispersion both of which were equally important and mutually supportive. The quality of intellectual exploration and creation would go hand in hand if we were able to give to students a high quality of education, then they in turn would become sources of new knowledge; but in order to achieve either, we would need to create an atmosphere where persons would be free to pursue their interests and capabilities to achieve excellence and thereby attract young students. The guru or the preceptor was seen to be at the heart of the task of knowledge generation who in a spirit of enquiry shared with the students under his care laid the foundation for a robust university. Institutions could carve their spaces with their

[11] RNT, 'The Centre of Indian Culture', op. cit. p. 469.

[12] RNT, 'An Eastern University', pp. 556–557.

[13] RNT, 'The Centre of Indian Culture', op. cit. p. 469.

special areas of excellence and focus—such reputations were perforce built over time and could not come ready-made. Universities realistically could not become full-grown from their birth; they would have to grow through generating knowledge and imparting quality education in organic connection with all aspects of society. Tagore thought, 'The school plays a minor part in the mental development of a European boy; the major part is played by the life of the country in which he grows up. Far from being divorced from life, European education is an integral part of it. It grows, develops and circulates in society and leaves its imprint on what people say, think, and do in their everyday life. The school is only a medium of culture which society has acquired through its long history and the manifold activities of many people. But the schools in our country, far from being integrated to society, are imposed on it from outside'.[14] Likewise, Tagore believed the Indian experience of education should grow out of its own culture, society, history, literature, geography, economy, flora and fauna and science.

5. And finally, '…our education should be in full touch with our complete life, economic, intellectual, aesthetic, social and spiritual; and our educational institutions should be in the very heart of our society, connected with it by the living bonds of varied co-operations. For true education is to realize at every step how our training and knowledge have organic connection with our surroundings'.[15]

Every time Tagore undertook some venture to give shape to his ideas, he looked to his inner self. We can see this in the extending of his school[16] into a full-fledged university. '…after many years of this school work, a new restlessness of spirit came over me. It seemed to me as if I had further need to expand my own life and to find my own freedom in a larger world of men and things. … I had found a few English friends who were ready to help me and to share in my work at Santiniketan. This brought a new element to the school itself. When these other scholars, teachers and friends came from the west with me, and helped me in my work, its spirit became widened. This new fact also gave me the thought that Santiniketan must open its doors. … It must represent the wider ideals, embracing humanity itself'.[17] Tagore further says, 'I had, all along, experienced the want of an institution in India, which should be a true centre for all the eastern cultures, concentrating in one spot the varied ideals of art and civilization which have been contributed to the world by the various countries of Asia. … The students who go to Europe from Asia come into touch with the great European mind from the very first. They have no difficulty in discovering the mind of Europe, because it is there before them as a unity. But such a concentration cannot be had in our Indian universities. … For the mind of Asia is not focused. It has not been brought to a

[14] RNT, 'The Problem of Education' 1906, *Towards Universal Man*, 1961, Bombay, Asia, pp. 67–82.

[15] Ibid, p. 469.

[16] The school originally named Brahmacharyashram was renamed Patha Bhavana in 1925 by which name it is known today.

[17] 'RNT, 'Visva-Bharati Ideal', op. cit. pp. 4–9.

centre. … I feel, when I look to the future that our Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan may become one of the intellectual gateways to India, which may connect our country intellectually and spiritually with the world outside'.[18] A literal reading of the above may lead us to question if Asia was at all a united entity. Tagore was probably not thinking on the lines of a forged unity; rather, he understood the need to establish a centre where such diversity could be studied. The Indian subcontinent is strategically situated (geographically and historically) more or less at the centre of Asia, and culturally, the subcontinent is characterized by diversity and incursions[19] into its social fabric. This in itself was the fare that could be given the appellate of the 'eastern mind'. The noted Indologist, Sylvan Levi supported these ideas of Tagore when he stated the unifying influence of, for instance, Buddhist culture throughout Asia. Levi wrote, 'India gave her mythology to her neighbours who went to teach it to the whole world. Mother of law and philosophy, she gave to three-quarters of Asia a god, a religion, a doctrine of art'.[20]

There were some focal areas in Tagore's early proposal of a centre of study: India should consolidate her own culture to be able to contribute to world culture; India was to invite her scholars from different educational centres in order to pursue and produce knowledge in an atmosphere of free and independent enquiry, and her educational centres were to be organically related to every aspect of the life of her people.[21] The curriculum of such centres of learning was to consist of all the different elements of Indian culture, the classic vernacular literature and its folk form. He also pleaded for giving to music and art a most important place in the curriculum. '…it is my desire to extend by degrees the scope of this university on simple lines until it comprehends the whole range of eastern cultures—the Aryan, Semitic, Mongolian and others'.[22] The curriculum suggested that Tagore was keen to bring to light those aspects of Indian life and culture that had somehow lost their shine, immediacy and primacy to the prevalent English medium and English pattern of education.

In the initial years of the formation of Visva-Bharati, Tagore was driven by the idea of an international centre of learning, but in manifesting his ideas, he proposed a step-by-step development in which we find an evolutionary trajectory from a nationalistic point of view to the encompassing view of embracing the world. Tagore's ideas of nationalism were in some contrast to the conventional ideas, and as he grew older, his critique of nationalism became more acute. In the essay 'An Eastern University' Tagore wrote, 'India has her renaissance. She is preparing to make her contribution to the world of the future …the new world which is

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[18] Ibid, pp. 10–20.

[19] There were many indigenous communities in India as far as we can go back in history, while it is also a fact that many communities have entered India from outside and made it their home.

[20] Sylvan Levi, quoted in Wilhelm Halfbass, *India and Europe*, 1988, Albany, SUNY cited in Kathleen M. O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet as Educator*, 2nd Edition, 2011, p. 264.

[21] RNT *Visva-Bharati*, 1919, RR, Volume 8.

[22] RNT, 'An Eastern University', op. cit. p. 558.

emerging from the wreckage of the old'. Tagore had seen this as the opportune moment for India to consolidate her position as a partner in the new culture of the world instead of being drawn into an imitation of the west without any organic connection to Indian culture and society. He wrote in the same essay, 'What is needed…is for the East to collect its own scattered lamps and offer them to the enlightenment of the world. There was a time when the great countries of Asia had to nurture its own civilization in comparative seclusion. Now has come the age of coordination and cooperation. The seedlings that were reared in narrow plots must now be transplanted into the open fields. They must pass the test of the world market. … But before Asia is in a position to cooperate with the culture of Europe, she must base her own structure on a synthesis of all the different cultures which she has'.

4.3 The Visva-Bharati Constitution

On 22 December 1921, Visva-Bharati was formally inaugurated; its global scope was obvious from the motto of the university, 'Where the world makes its home in a single nest'. At the opening ceremony, Tagore handed over the land, buildings, library, as well as the copyright for his books and interest from the Nobel Prize money to the Visva-Bharati Society.[23] The constitution of Visva-Bharati is as follows[24]:

- To study the mind of man in its realization of different aspects of truth from diverse points of view.
- To bring into more intimate relation with one another through patient study and research, the different cultures of the East on the basis of their underlying unity.
- To approach the West from the standpoint of such a unity of the life and thought of Asia.
- To seek to realize in a common fellowship of study the meeting of East and West and thus ultimately to strengthen the fundamental conditions of world peace through the free communication of ideas between the two hemispheres.
- And with such ideals in view to provide at Santiniketan, a centre of culture where research into the study of the religion, literature, history, science and art of the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian, Islamic, Sikh, Christian and other civilizations may be pursued along with the culture of the West, with that simplicity of externals which is necessary for true spiritual realization, in amity, good fellowship and cooperation between the thinkers and scholars of both Eastern and Western countries, free from all antagonisms of race, nationality, creed or caste and in the name of one supreme being who is Shantam, Shivam, Advaitam.

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[23] Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindra Jivani*, Volume 3, 5th Edition, 2008.

[24] The constitution was drawn up by Prasanta Mahalanobis (later the founder of the premier Indian Statistical Institute) and Tagore's nephew, Surendranath Tagore cited in Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit. p. 269.

The constitution suggested a strengthening of the east and a meeting with the west on equal terms of fellowship and amity. Thus, Visva-Bharati was not intended to remain just a centre of Indian culture but to become an eastern university and then grow into an international one. In an address, Tagore observed, 'Providence will not allow living in isolation in this world. …must unite man with man…'[25] This sentiment was echoed many years later in 1937 when the Chinese scholar Tan Yun Shan started the activities of the Cheena Bhavana (the Chinese Department) in Visva-Bharati; Tan Yun Shan had stayed on in Santiniketan till his death in the late 1980s, devoting his life to the development of Chinese studies.[26] Tagore had said then, 'Let all human races keep their own personalities, yet come together not in a uniformity that is dead, but in a unity that is living. Visva-Bharati will remain a meeting place for individuals from all countries, East or West, who believe in the unity of mankind and are prepared to suffer for their faith'.[27] Right from its inception, Visva-Bharati was host to many scholars from India and the rest of the world. Some of the significant visitors who came were Morris Winternitz and Vincent Lesny (Chekoslovakia 1922); Stella Kramrisch (Austrian art historian and critic 1923); Sten Konow (expert on ancient languages and archaeologist from Norway); and Josef Tucci, Formicci from Italy; Tucci, apart from several European languages, knew Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Chinese and Tibetan as well being a noted Buddhist scholar. Chinese scholar Ngo Cheongtin initiated Chinese studies in Visva-Bharati in 1924. Sylvan Levi was the first visiting professor from France; he specialized in Chinese and Tibetan studies, while his wife who accompanied him taught French language and literature. During the course of his stay (almost a year), he gave a weekly talk on the connections between the Western world and ancient India. Patrick Geddes and his son Arthur Geddes visited Visva-Bharati, and Arthur Geddes taught in the Sriniketan school, Siksha Satra (to be discussed later), for almost two years; he also played a significant role with Elmhirst in planning the activities and programmes of that school. James Henry cousins gave a series of lectures on poetics and culture of Asia (1926). He had advocated the adoption of Tagore's song *Jana gana mana* as the national anthem in 1937. William Pearson, Charles Freer Andrews and Leonard Knight Elmhirst could be described as the 'abiding trio' who were involved in many of Tagore's projects and endeavours for as long as they lived. The work of the first two has been discussed in the previous chapter, while Elmhirst's role in the development of Sriniketan will be discussed in the next chapter. There were many more scholars, artists, craftspeople and Judo teachers from Japan who all visited Visva-Bharati for varying lengths of time. Thus, we see that Tagore provided a rich fare in both scholars and

[25] RNT, Address to Asramik Sangha, *Praktani*, Santiniketan, Visva-Bharati, 23 December, 1921.

[26] A detail about the Tan family in Santiniketan—during the 1962 war between India and China, the Tan family had to report to the Police headquarters in the district capital regularly and yet the family did not leave Santiniketan.

[27] Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Santiniketan—Visvabharati*, Volume 1, 1962, Kolkata, Bookland Pvt. Ltd., pp. 255–256.

scholarship from all over the world (surplus in action so to say) setting the tone of Visva-Bharati as a truly international university.

4.4 Organizing a University

The Visva-Bharati programme can be seen from four major aspects founded on the principle of all-round education for the development of the 'complete person' that informed all his educational efforts. The aspects were as follows[28]:

- As a centre of Indian culture, for the coordination and cultivation of the different aspects of Indian learning and culture, past and present.
- As a centre of Eastern culture for the concentration and cultivation of the different cultures of the Asian countries, in order to realize the unity of the eastern spirit and harness it to the cause of human welfare.
- As a centre of International culture which seeks to establish a living relationship between the east and the west to promote interracial amity and intercultural understanding and fulfil the highest mission of the present age—the unification of mankind.
- As a centre for rural reconstruction to lay the foundation of a happy, contented and humane life in village as well as inculcate the spirit of social service and produce practical efficiency as the essential part of education.

Administratively, the academic and art programmes at Visva-Bharati were carried out through faculties known as Bhavanas; the Vidya Bhavana administered academic activities and research, and Siksha Bhavana was the centre of undergraduate and graduate programmes. The courses of regular study in the university included Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, Sanskrit grammar, English literature and criticism and biology; Pali and Prakrit languages were added as was philology, and the prospectus of 1941 suggested that these courses were maintained from 1920 till 1941. Many noted research works were started, and some were completed after the death of the poet in 1941. The Kala Bhavana was the faculty of fine art, while the Sangit Bhavana that separated in 1934 from Kala Bhavana as an independent Bhavana was for music and dance. Tagore had carefully built up a network of Indian and foreign scholars to attract students from all over India and the world. Some of the Indian scholars and preceptors in Visva-Bharati were Kshitimohan Sen (scholar of Pali and folk culture); Sanskritist Bidhu Shekhar Sastri; linguist Haricharan Bandopadhyay (who took up the work of compiling the Bengali dictionary); Vidhusekhar Bhattacharya (teacher of the Vedas, Puranas and Buddhist scriptures); and Gurdial Mallik who taught English and Sufism. Nandalal Bose (artist and follower of Ananda Coomaraswamy and student of Abanindranath Tagore of the

[28] For details, see H.B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness: a Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, 2013, India, Routledge, pp. 194–195.

Bengal School) was Principal, Kala Bhavana; Surendranath Kar, Mukul Dey, Asit Haldar, Benodebihari Mukherjee, Vinayakrao Masoji and Ramkinkar Baij were some of the stalwart artists who gave shape to Tagore's vision of the place of art in education and art as an essential part of culture. The various arts and crafts of the different parts of India and the Asian countries toured by Tagore were brought to Santiniketan and studied. There was an effort to develop a national standard of aesthetics emerging from within the culture of India rather than being borrowed from outside. Tagore wrote, 'In the proposed centres of our cultures, music and art must have their prominent seats of honour, and not merely a tolerant nod of recognition. The different systems of music and different schools of art, which lie scattered in the different ages and provinces of India, and in the different strata of society, have to be brought together there and studied. Thus, a real standard of aesthetic taste will develop; and with its help our own art will grow in strength and riches, enabling us to judge all foreign arts with the soberness and appropriate from them ideas and forms without incurring the charge of plagiarism'.[29] Likewise, the different crafts and arts of the Asian countries like the *Batik* (printing technology with molten wax from Indonesia) were introduced in Santiniketan, and this over the years revolutionized the craft scene in the locality of Santiniketan, giving it a distinct identity of 'Santiniketan art'. This craft is versatile to an extent that *batik* can be done on cloth and leather, and this has given birth to a widespread cottage industry in the district in which the university is situated. Tagore had clearly stated, 'Our centre of culture should not only be the centre of the intellectual life of India, but the centre of her economic life also … Such an institution must group round it all the neighbouring villages and vitally unite them with itself in all its economic endeavours'.[30]

Furthermore, for the study of music, Tagore brought Bhim Sastri, Nakuleswar Banerjee and his own talented nephew, Dinendranath Tagore, a gifted musician who specialized in writing the notations to Tagore's songs and music. Manipuri (from Manipur, north-east of India) and Kathakali (from Kerala, southern India) were the two dance forms taught followed by the home-grown and innovative Rabindra Nritya that was an amalgamation of many dance forms—Kandy (from Sri Lanka), Javanese/Indonesian and the modern dance forms created by Uday Shankar. Tagore toured with his troupe of dancers and singers in India in an effort to spread the message of Visva-Bharati and to raise much needed funds for his university; incidentally, the performances on the tours were much appreciated. In 1935, the Hindi Bhavana was established with the help of the funds raised by C.F. Andrews as an outcome of Gandhi and Tagore agreeing on the role of Hindi as the language of interface between the regions of India and therefore its importance. 'In the higher levels of study in Visva-Bharati the natural sciences were conspicuously absent. Because of the lack of government funding and the uncertain flow of donations, Tagore could not afford to install laboratories and employ scientists.

[29] RNT, *The Centre for Indian Culture*, op. cit. p. 489.

[30] Ibid, p. 490.

But there is evidence of his keen awareness of the importance of a scientific attitude…'[31] It is amply clear that Tagore was unstinted in his efforts to create an institution of excellence, the parallel of which was not yet established in India; he did all this without government aid—donations were irregular and not sustained over long periods of time and this meant that the financial burden to a great extent was on his shoulders.

4.5 A Disturbed Friendship

Tagore had a deep friendship[32] with the eminent historian, Jadunath Sarkar. Jadunath was deeply attracted to the idea of the Santiniketan school and the method of teaching in mother tongue adopted there. Jadunath was his advisor when Tagore was planning the volumes of Visvavidya Sangraha cast in the pattern of the Home University Library and Cambridge Manuals of Science and Literature; Jadunath as editor drew up the instruction sheet for the probable writers of the titles in this series that even today could be of use to young scholars. The correspondence of Tagore and Jadunath between May 1922 and June 1922 touched upon their differences on some fundamental issues of the educational ideals and activities of Visva-Bharati. Tagore had invited Jadunath to be a member of the Visva-Bharati governing body, but he had declined stating his inability to give enough time and energy to the task required of him. But there were other more important reasons as revealed from Jadunath's letter to Rabindranath. Jadunath in his letter commended the provisions in the university for the first stage of education or the school and predicted that in time the highest level of education or the research activities would flourish with all the elaborate arrangements that had been made bringing scholars from near and far. However, he had serious reservations about the second or middle stage of education—the undergraduate and graduate studies. He felt that the students of Santiniketan lacked in academic and intellectual discipline and rigour. He also felt that the students of Visva-Bharati were over concerned with the ideas of the international man and in being the aesthete rather than having the mindset required for concentrated academic purposes built on pursuit and perseverance required of exact knowledge. Rabindranath was deeply affected by this letter and his reply conveyed to Jadunath his sense of deep hurt; it seemed that he had indeed taken the objections rather personally. This resulted in a misunderstanding.

Sarkar had probably been too quick in making such an assessment when the university was only a few years old. Tagore on his part did not seem ready to dispassionately consider the objections raised, and he was unwilling to seriously

[31] Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, op. cit. p. 196.

[32] For details on the friendship between Rabindranath and Jadunath Sarkar, see Bikash Chakravarty, 2010, op. cit.

consider the indicated want of intellectual discipline or that the middle level could pose an impediment to achieving excellence in higher education. The point was not the fact that two great friends argued with each other but for us to take an impartial and detached view so that we are able to see the matter for a better outcome—we can only do this from the perspective of the present. A system that seamlessly connected elementary education with the highest levels of learning could have serious disadvantages, and drawbacks did not occur to Tagore. This was the point of objection that Jadunath raised about the students availing of a continuous stay in Visva-Bharati right from their elementary level right up to the higher levels. On hindsight, from the perspective of the present condition of Visva-Bharati, such kind of inbreeding is one of the main criticisms against the university—the general perception being that the university is today parochial, insular and cocooned and has limited attractiveness to students who would like to study in Visva-Bharati for only their higher degree in courses of their interest. The other point of objection that was important to Jadunath was that he believed that the primary task of a university was provision of quality education for which academic excellence and exact knowledge were prerequisites, while Tagore believed that the primary task was knowledge generation and he was naturally more concerned with that. At the present, the university is like any other university in India with regular courses of undergraduate and graduate studies, the distinction being that a school forms the nucleus of the university. There is every possibility that a child can go right up to the highest level from the level of the school. Its other distinctive qualities that envisaged the vision of its founder are today somewhat low-key.

4.6 Tagore's Transnational Links and Educational Movements

In an article entitled 'Paulus'[33] in memory of the well-known German educationist, Paul Geheeb, the writer, Aurobindo Mohan Bose, the twelfth student to have joined Tagore's school, claimed that his interest in the New Education Fellowship owed to his years in Santiniketan. He visited Odenwaldschule in 1927 where he stayed on for almost 3 weeks with the Geheebs. He was so impressed with his experience that he wrote to Tagore insisting upon him to visit, and Tagore did so in 1930. Bose believed that both Tagore and Geheeb brought the offering of love and simple faith to the altar of the God of humanity. Tagore had written, 'Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man'. The correspondence[34] between the Geheebs (Paul and Edith Geheeb) and Tagore revealed their mutual interests and the deep respect they had for each other. Tagore wrote to

[33] A copy of the article kept in correspondence files, serial number 131 entitled Paul and Edith Geheeb, Rabindra Bhavana Archives, Visva-Bharati (henceforth RB).

[34] Letters between Tagore and Geheebs, correspondence files, serial number 131 entitled Paul and Edith Geheeb, RB.

Geheeb 'Enlightened education and organizations like your Institut Monnier and my Santiniketan have indeed a great role to play in saving civilization'. Geheeb contributed an article in 1936 entitled, 'A School of Mankind' to the journal Visva-Bharati Quarterly (VBQ). In a letter in 1929, Edith Geheeb (Paul Geheeb's wife) stated that in her opinion, much of the work they had started in Odenwaldschule and Institut Monnier was already accomplished in Santiniketan. She also wrote to Tagore how his works were read to the children and that she was studying the Upanishads and the Gita and learning Sanskrit. She signed off with *namaskar* written in the Devanagari script.

Tagore was abreast of the move of the Geheebs to Switzerland from Germany in 1935 in support of which and to provide assistance Tagore had signed a public petition to raise funds for them; Geheeb had invited him to attend the 7th World Conference of the New Education Fellowship at London, but Tagore was unable to go.[35]

In 1926, Tagore came in contact with Maria Montessori; he praised her methods and regretted that the present government system in India did not allow this method to be extensively followed. The Montessori method was considered expensive. She invited Tagore to be a member of the Honorary Committee to which he agreed, and in 1936, he inaugurated the Benaras Montessori School in India.

Tagore's abiding interest in the works of L.K. Elmhirst and his wife Dorothy Straight at Dartington Hall, Britain, has already been referred to. The advice that he gave to Elmhirst on method and curriculum involving the value of motion in education testified to his deep engagement with this endeavour and of its kinship with the Santiniketan effort.[36]

'Tagore's conception of total education has much in common with the Greek conception of liberal education of a fully developed personality as formulated by Plato. … The great emphasis on music and education, laid both in the Greek and Tagore's systems, also presents a parallelism… Among English philosophers and educational thinkers, Locke and Spencer exerted the greatest influence in the nineteenth century not only in England but also in India since the time western education was firmly established in the Indian universities. Many striking similarities in the educational ideas of Locke and Tagore… warrant the conjecture that Tagore was familiar with Locke's educational doctrines. … Tagore's great emphasis on education in Nature would naturally suggest Rousseau's influence…'[37]

Tagore had affinity with the reformistic zeal of Pestalozzi and Froebel, for his profound love of nature and the spiritual vision of unity amidst the diversities of creation as embodied in his kindergarten movement. Spencer was another great influence on Tagore's thoughts on scientific studies. Tagore must have been familiar with the work of John Dewey who founded in 1896 a Laboratory School at Chicago, USA, that largely went unnoticed till his famous book, *Democracy and*

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Peter Cox, 'The Dartington Connection', Naresh Guha (ed.) *VBQ*, Volume 50, Numbers 1–4, May 1984–April 1985, pp. 122–128.

[37] H. B. Mukherjee, op.cit. pp. 419–420.

Education, was published in 1916 by which time; however, most of Tagore's fundamental tenets of educational philosophy had taken shape. The working of the Siksha Satra, the school in Sriniketan, bore testimony to Dewey's methods of the activity curriculum. It would be an error of judgement to say that Tagore imitated Western educators in his own endeavours, but the similarities and affinities he shared with them seemed worth noting. Wherever Tagore travelled, he visited schools, talked to teachers and students and enquired about the most intelligent systems of education. He was keenly interested in modern developments in educational theory and practice and was ever ready to assimilate those ideas. Tagore was a true believer in the transnational dialogues in ideas across the world.

Tagore was familiar with the New School Movement that swept the world in the 20th century viz. '…forerunners such as Pestalozzi's school in Yverdon, Froebel's Kindergarten and Leo Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana… especially in Europe (Montessori, Geheeb), in the United States (Dewey, Parkhurst, Kilpatrick), in Latin America (Caballero) and according to Ottonello, [one of] the first new school was founded by Rabindranath Tagore in Santiniketan in 1901'.[38]

In another article, we find an affinity between Tagore and Thoreau (Henry David Thoreau 1816–1872, half a century older than Tagore); both were champions of 'learning in nature and from communities'. Thoreau had expressed himself strongly against 'addiction to luxuries' and a 'life saturated with superfluities', while Tagore had been equally outspoken about the high value he ascribed to 'simplicity than the appendages of luxury'. Both of them were sceptical about knowledge gained exclusively from books and academic teaching. Both believed in the idea of freedom and emancipation of the spirit as being education.[39]

4.7 Tagore's Internationalism

Tagore did not make great distinction between what he understood as nationalism and internationalism; his nationalism was world-embracing and inclusive, and his ideas of internationalism included all of humanity. In the way that 'his country is not his by the mere accident of birth, he must richly and intimately transform it into his own', so it is also with the world of humanity. Further, Tagore saw world problems and national interests as interrelated, '…our problem is world-wide and no one people of the earth can work out its salvation by detaching itself from others. Either we shall be saved together or drawn together into destruction'.[40]

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[38] Jose Paz Rodriguez, 'Tagore and his Relationship with the European New School Movement: Santiniketan, Odenwaldschule and Institution Libre de Ensenanza', *VBQ*, New Series, Volume 11, Number 1: April–June 2002, p. 3.

[39] For detailed discussion on this see Fakrul Alam, 'Luminous with Vision: Rabindranath Tagore, Thoreau and Life-centred Education amidst Nature', *Rabindranath Tagore and National Identity Formation in Bangladesh: Essays and Reviews*, 2012, Dhaka, Bangla Academy.

[40] RNT letter to Andrews 1921.

Tagore saw internationalism as the inner spirit of the modern age, and it was the duty of every nation to nurture it. It is interesting to recall that the day after World War I broke, Tagore gave a lecture at the Santiniketan mandir entitled, *Ma ma hingsi*[41] that expounded on the necessity of abstaining from violence and to learn from the lessons of war so that humanity was not hurled into its meaninglessness. He was aware of what was happening in the world, had happened in history and more importantly what could be learnt from such so that the Indian experience of education and life could be enhanced.[42]

Tagore based his philosophy of internationalism on the cooperation and coordination in the field of knowledge and culture claiming, '[to] prepare the grand field for the coordination of the cultures of the world'. His derived values are as follows:

- Fundamental unity of man and that knowledge has no boundaries and is a collective endeavour of all men of all time and all lands.
- True self-expression and self-realization come from the ability to merge one's individuality into the many and break out of egoistical isolation and selfish interests.
- War is not a solution for international problems.
- The importance of the cultivation of the power of reasoning and clear thinking to achieve peace, harmony and progress.

In his philosophy of internationalism, Tagore was far ahead of his times and he ploughed a lonely furrow. He was subject to a bitter opposition from a country impatient to shrug off the British. Yet, the atmosphere in Santiniketan struck the visitors, Indian and foreign; '…one of the most spiritually stimulating places in the world looking beyond our day to a world harmony'.[43] The expression and manifestation of internationalism in Visva-Bharati is a testimony of Tagore's ability to look beyond his times, his age, not as an act of sooth-saying prophecy but as a rational process of synthesizing the clues from the small and big events of his times aided with the intense clarity of his insight. He fearlessly and relentlessly engaged his reason with whatever he encountered. Sten Konow wrote, 'It is a poet's vision, but it came at a time when men were in sore need. The gospel of Jesus had proved powerless when people rose against people and each of them in the name of the King of Peace called upon men to take up arms. … The outlook in the west seemed hopeless, when the Poet came and asked us to seek salvation through faith in new ideas. Wise men of the world smiled but there were individuals who felt that there was yet hope for humanity'.[44]

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[41] RNT, 'Ma ma hingsi', *Santiniketan*, RR, (1914), Volume 8, 1988, pp. 675–677.

[42] RNT, 'Siksha Sanskar', *Siksha*, RR, Volume 6, 1988. In this essay, Tagore displays a fully cognizant awareness of the history of the eclipse of Irish education overshadowed by the English language after the attack by England in the dark ages. Those areas of Ireland not touched by war and occupation continued to pursue the paths of knowledge in the Irish language though in occupied Ireland, the native language was discarded as the language of the defeated.

[43] Lt. Col. Yeats Brown, *Visva-Bharati News*, February 1936.

[44] Sten Konow, 'Visva-Bharati and its Ideals' in Modern Review, February 1925.

Tagore was a pioneering light in international education in the world; historically too, his ideas predated most other efforts in this direction. Tagore was one of the first to realize that the time of **this idea** was imminent and that it required appropriate responses. It is remarkable today that most modern universities offer courses in international or transnational studies; there are institutions that deal with world peace, cooperation and conflict resolution as academic disciplines with strong application dimensions.

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Chapter 5
Extension of the Self and Rural Reconstruction

Abstract Tagore gained his first insight into the condition of the Indian peasant during the decade (1890–1900) he looked after the family estates where he made two important discoveries: first, the villagers seemed to have lost all ability to help themselves and secondly, both research and technical assistance would be needed if they were to learn how to rescue themselves from their creeping decay. This idea was indeed way ahead of his times—that education and knowledge could be pressed into professional service of the needy and the excluded that he demonstrated in his institution in Sriniketan (the twin campus to Santiniketan). This chapter not only traces the historical development of Tagore's ideas of rural reconstruction or the Sriniketan Experiment but also raises some important questions that are relevant in the functioning of the university even today. Rabindranath believed that there were many syncretic strands and patterns that made a composite culture and there was the danger of the strands and streams drying up because of the urban-driven nature of development. L. K. Elmhirst, British agricultural scientist, was one of the chief architects of the Sriniketan experiment that started functioning in 1922 with the objective, 'To bring back life in its completeness into the villages making them self-reliant and self-respectful, acquainted with the cultural traditions of their own country and competent to make an efficient use of the modern resources for the improvement of their physical, intellectual and economic condition'. Varied and multi-faceted programmes including mass and continuous education were undertaken in Sriniketan for the fulfilment of the above objective.

Keywords Education and extension • Rural reconstruction • Rural-urban divide • Syncretism and complete education • Mass education

> … by country we mean the country of the gentlefolk alone. The common people we contemptuously describe as the "lower class". This appellation has entered into our marrow since a long time now. … We belong to the same country, yet we are strangers to one another.[1]

[1] Rabindranath Tagore (henceforth RNT), *Russia-r Chithi*, 1931, *Rabindra Rachanavali* (henceforth RR), Volume 10, 1989, pp. 551–616

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5.1 Bridging the Divide

Tagore wrote[2] about how history could be taught to common people through the means of folk tales and the practice of folk theatre and performance narrators (Jatra and Kathakata).[3] These means, he added, could be used for people who had not been able to avail of education but had the desire to know. Knowledge of history was important as it informed people of what the heritage had been and what significant things needed to be preserved; that knowledge of history provided a direction to aspirations; Tagore affirmed that often the disparity between the educated and the uneducated was the absence of a historical perspective and that this difference could easily be removed. He mentioned how historical novels and plays were the accepted means of history education in Europe. In the essay a practical Tagore advocated the use of indigenous means and methods to spread **quality** education to the masses. He stressed on mass education as well as on the quality of that education.

Tagore gained his first insight into the condition of the Indian peasant during the decade (1890–1900) he looked after the family estates in Selidaha and Patisar. Kripalani wrote, 'Much as he may have shied at first from this onerous responsibility, he was later grateful to his father for having yoked him to it. …the years he thus spent in the heart of rural Bengal widened and strengthened his intimacy with nature which he loved and provided glimpses into the varied landscape of his country which he otherwise might not have known. This was rich food for his poetry. But even richer were the insights he gained into the life of the common people, their drudgery and constant struggle against the freaks of nature, the callous indifference of landlords and the no less callous indifference of a rigid social orthodoxy and an alien political rule. This first-hand knowledge gave him the insight into the lives of the people and an understanding of the scope of these lives'.[4] Elmhirst in his personal reminiscences of his meeting with Tagore in New York in 1920 wrote, 'Around December 1890 his father sent him, then 29 years of age, to live on and to manage the Tagore family properties in East Bengal. There he made two important discoveries: first, that the villagers seemed to have lost all ability to help themselves; secondly, that both research and technical assistance would be needed if they were ever to learn how to rescue themselves from their creeping decay'.[5] Tagore had written, 'There should be some common sharing of life with the tillers of the soil and the humble workers in the neighbouring villages; studying their crafts, inviting them to feasts, joining them in works of cooperation for communal welfare; and in our

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[2] RNT, Itihas Katha, RR, Volume 6, 1988, pp. 722–723.

[3] The power of the medium of *Jatra* and *Kathakata* is potent even today—public campaigns of social reform and uplift of people are advocated by the traditional minstrels and other folk performers travelling from one place to another in rural India; the Patuas of Bengal also perform this role.

[4] Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, 2008, pp. 144–145.

[5] L. K. Elmhirst, *Poet and Plowman*, 2008, (2nd Edition), pp. 1–2. Elmhirst undertook the work of Rural Reconstruction from its beginning in Visva-Bharati.

intercourse we should be guided, not by moral maxims or the condescension of social superiority, but by natural sympathy of life for life'.[6]

Later, Tagore elucidated, '…it occurred to me that there was a formidable gulf that existed between man and man. This gulf had to be removed till all men could be released in the vast universe of man'.[7] These then were the ideational beginnings of the work in the field of education undertaken by Tagore in the third phase of his work, the Sriniketan Experiment of Rural Reconstruction. He started thinking about the issues of education for the rural people during his stay in the family estates (1890–1901). He went on to establish a school in Santiniketan that later transformed and grew into a university while maintaining the symbiotic links between elementary and higher education and finally, Tagore came full circle to his earlier focus on amelioration and enhancement of the conditions of village life and bridging the gulf between man and man in what he had apprehended would be; 'the terribleness of the weak and the challenge of the disarmed. The dumb fury of the downtrodden… would one day burst into a flame of disastrous revolution… unless handled with sympathy and love'.[8] In many of his writings, he placed emphasis on the need to include the community within the fold of education and his belief that the natural role of a university was to extend itself to the community outside of its system so that neighbours were not strangers to each other separated by the gulf of education. Such an idea was not part of the consciousness of people. In 1912, Tagore purchased a mansion-like building along with some land in Surul village not far from his asrama in Santiniketan. This building was known as *Kuthi Bari,* and in 1923, Tagore named this new acquired area, Sriniketan; thus, there were now two campuses at about 3 km distance from each other—Santiniketan and Sriniketan or the twin campuses of Visva-Bharati. Tagore situated the work of his Rural Reconstruction in Sriniketan and hence the name, Sriniketan Experiment.

Though Tagore turned to the ancient texts when he had started thinking about manifesting his ideas of education and found his ideal in the ancient forest hermitages of harmony and peace as the appropriate location for meaningful and complete education; for his university, he looked to the world for his ideas on internationalism and humanism. For his village development work, he looked ahead to the distant future—there was no precedence or parallel for the kind of work that he started in the villages in that time. He transformed his ideas into action by the application of knowledge to the problems of real situations in order to solve them and bring about sustained change in the desired direction among the masses of rural India. Social reformers who were his idols like Ram Mohun Roy had concentrated their efforts in bringing about changes in existing structures of social laws, dispensations and policies; very few of them had actually got down to the grass roots so to say; in contrast, Tagore got down to the task as if with his entire mind and body. This was indeed way beyond his times.

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[6] RNT, 'An eastern University', 1922, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 2 (henceforth EWRT2), p. 568.

[7] RNT, 2nd Talk, 23 December 1923, Visva-Bharati, RR, Volume 14, 1991, pp. 239–296.

[8] RNT, 'The Modern Age', *Creative Unity* (1922), EWRT2, pp. 542–543.

5.2 The Yester Years (1922–1941)

I shall try to present a comparative discussion of the **there and then** of Rabindranath's Sriniketan experiment of Rural Reconstruction that could be compared with the **here and now**—how much of the two are comparable and how the present has been reshaped and readjusted in order to assess whether Visva-Bharati is on the desired trajectory set in motion by the founder. Has the institution in the present context been able to internalize the founding values and principles about the 'giving' and 'taking' between the urban 'educated' and the rural 'uneducated' individuals? It would be grossly wrong to dismiss the rural population as uneducated because they are illiterate; there are individuals among them who are reflective; there are many who in their professions or chosen occupations are experts, while there are many who aspire to transcend their situation through modern education but feel stymied when faced with the existing education systems. Did the institution have some inbuilt mechanisms by which the 'illiterate' rural individuals were given not only a hearing but were considered to be at par? Did it respond to the needs of the time and situation? Has Visva-Bharati in the present been able to expand on this work and enlarge the range of inclusion that Tagore envisaged? How has Visva-Bharati, over the years, synchronized and synthesized its educational efforts and the work of Rural Reconstruction?

The history (of the Sriniketan Experiment) enjoins us to build upon the repertoire of evolved strengths through continuous engagement with the reality of the rural situation and to prepare oneself through the engagement to undertake the multi-dimensional tasks called for in this endeavour. These were the core values of the experiments Rabindranath conducted, be they on education or rural reconstruction—the values by which one enriched the self as well as the other. In other words, the formation of the complete person was through mutual exchange of knowledge, goodwill, respect and faith in the idea that human categories or groups were complementary to each other. In Rabindranath's conception of education, the roles of the teacher and the taught were not exactly the one of the 'giver' and the 'given'. The recipient villager was not to be seen as a passive 'taker' and the service provider as the dominant 'giver'. Through this exchange, the villagers were enabled to exercise their own agency in order to negotiate advantageously with the demands and pace of a changing world and thus overcoming their circumstances. Rabindranath learned from his direct experience of rural life of the crippling social customs, superstitions, and credit procedures on the one hand, and on the other, he learnt about the power of the folk culture and its many forms, the natural wisdom of the people and their general fortitude in the face of abject poverty. Tagore had abiding faith in the strength of village society; he described village life as being the cradle of civilization, 'At one time our rural society was living (vibrant). It is through this society that the link of union of the whole country was forged and the current of knowledge, service, and religion flowed into the villages. … Our educated classes have perused from beginning to end the history of all manner of movements in the west, but are unaware that among our masses too innumerable movements have been taking place. … There are so many religious sects like the

Auls and Bauls among the masses… in many respects there is greater profundity in these than in the newfangled religious efforts of the upper classes; the literature that has grown up among these sects, too, is worthy of respect and preservation'.[9]

In human exchange, it is natural for interactions to be loaded on any one side, and when the exchange is between the 'educated' and the 'uneducated', the loading is predictable and is often a handicap in fostering true exchange or understanding based on reciprocity. That the dialogue between the 'urban' and the villager is 'loaded' does not need to be emphasized. It is in this context of righting the balance that we ask what attitudes underlined Sriniketan's approach to the villages in which it organized its programmes. How did this work impact on the lives of people and their relationship with Visva-Bharati?

What were the early programmes that Tagore undertook with which he started this work? Initially, the setting of this work was in Selaidaha and Patisar, the two family estates of the Tagore family. He had started cooperative banking, encouraged village crafts and cottage industries, expanded primary and adult education, improved of village roads and rural hygiene, established a library and a laboratory for agricultural research while he was on his family estates. All his efforts there did not meet with complete success while some efforts failed completely; for manifold causes; chief among them was the distrust of the villagers who looked upon any kind of such initiative with suspicion and a feeling that it (welfare measure) was at the cost of their salvation ensuring for the landlord his place in heaven in the other life! This gradually led Tagore to think along lines of 'community responsibility and transformation of individual consciousness at all levels through education and grassroots involvement'.[10]

Tagore sent his son Rathindranath in 1906 to study agriculture in the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champagne, USA, and on his return in 1909, Tagore with his son set out to create the kind of society he had in mind in rural Bengal. He sent Rathindranath to the family estates to see first-hand the multiple programmes that had been initiated there. In a letter to Abala Bose, Tagore wrote, 'Arrangement has been made so the villagers should be able to undertake welfare measures themselves by repairing roads, removing the dearth of water, settling disputes by arbitration, establishing schools, clearing jungles, providing against famines by setting up Dharma-golas (grain storage banks), etc., and in every way to contribute their share in village welfare'.[11] Tagore set up an agricultural bank at Patisar, one of the family estates, first with borrowed money and later with the donation of the Nobel award prize; a village society to provide educational facilities for children that

[9] RNT, 'Education for Rural India', *Introduction to Tagore*, 1997, pp. 23–26; the Auls and Bauls are the sects of wandering minstrels who propagate a way of life that is based on equality of people in the eyes of God and freedom from all social restrictions that separate man from man or woman.

[10] Kathleen M. O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator*, 2012 (2nd Edition), p. 281.

[11] Ibid, p. 283. Abala Bose was Sir Jagadish Bose's (the scientist) wife; both of them were closely linked with Tagore's work and personally his close friends.

included primary schools and one high school as well as crop diversification and the establishment of a weaving school. These evidences of the initial 'experiments' that Tagore conducted in addressing the conditions of his subjects in his care in the family estates indicated a conjoined effort to 'see' the situation from as many angles as possible. He was conscious of the fact that human conditions were rarely caused by isolated factors; but by factors that were enmeshed in each other in such a manner that when isolated, any one factor would cease to have much impact when addressed exclusively. Concentrating on solving each problem in isolation would have led to very little success.

Rabindranath believed in the many syncretic strands and patterns embellishing a culture that too a culture with a long history as a civilization, as coming from its many components—folk, classical and indigenous, spread through the length and breadth of the country from its ancient past to its present.[12] He bemoaned the increasing impoverishment of the cultural fabric of once vibrant villages at the cost of 'developing' towns and urban lifestyles. He had eloquently expressed the imbalanced relationship of the town and the village with the analogy of a social system that only fed the brain (towns) leaving the limbs (villages) paralysed—urban-driven nature of all development resulted in the utter impoverishment of the villages and in other words, the majority of the nation as the country was chiefly composed of villages. Could the educated, who were greatly responsible for this skewed growth, have called this development? This ethical question was also echoed by Gandhi who advocated the idea of the Village Republic in order to obviate the stultifying effects of urbanization and of the State. 'My Idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary. Thus every village's first concern would be to grow its own food crops, and cotton for its cloth. It should have reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding ganja, tobacco, opium and the like. The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own waterworks ensuring clean water supply. This can be done through controlled wells or tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the co-operative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability'.[13]

L. K. Elmhirst, British Agricultural Scientist, studying agriculture at Cornell, USA, came to Santiniketan in November 1921 on an invitation that Tagore had made to him in New York in early 1920. Elmhirst had had previous experience in India in the field of agriculture. He was briefed by Tagore on what Tagore wanted to do in the surrounding villages of the newly purchased farm and building in Surul village some distance away from Santiniketan. Visva-Bharati had just been established. Elmhirst discussed his own plans in some detail and found that some

[12] Cf. Rabindranath Tagore, 'Message of India's History' *Introduction to Tagore*, p. 7.

[13] M. K. Gandhi, 'Every Village a Republic', *Harijan*, 26 July, 1942. http://www.mkgandhi.org/indiadreams/chap24.htm.

of the groundwork had already been started. Elmhirst was deeply impressed by Tagore's vision and schemes for village uplift and took up the challenge to steer the work. He was also instrumental in ensuring an annual recurring grant of about Rs. 50,000 by a wealthy American philanthropist, Dorothy Straight, for the project. She later became Elmhirst's wife.

The Institute of Rural Reconstruction or Sriniketan was inaugurated on 6 February 1922 and Elmhirst was its first Director. Thus, Tagore, Elmhirst and Dorothy from three continents came together for this momentous work for the sake of humanity. In spite of the financial strain brought about by the Second World War, Dorothy's generous grant continued up to 1941. 'It would be little exaggeration to say that during the period which (Elmhirst) spent at Sriniketan; he truly laid the foundation of the Institute. But for his efforts it could not have attained its present stature. On many occasions Tagore has acknowledged the services rendered by Leonard Elmhirst'.[14] This new institution nevertheless had to face severe handicaps and financial stress. Funds were continuously required for acquiring more land in order to set up model agricultural farms, sheds for cottage industries, farms for dairy, poultry, etc., and for wells to be dug for supply of water, in other words to build the infrastructure. Animals had to be procured and the place had to be protected against soil erosion through tree planting on a massive scale. Sanitation and water drainage systems were almost non-existent and that was one of the causes that the area was malaria-infested. There were other M's also—monkey and mistrust, and it was against these three M's, malaria, monkeys and mistrust, that the battle had to be fought.[15]

The central ideal of the Institute is stated by Tagore in the following words:

> The object of Sriniketan is to bring back life in its completeness into the villages making them self-reliant and self-respectful, acquainted with the cultural traditions of their own country, and competent to make an efficient use of the modern resources for the improvement of their physical, intellectual and economic condition.[16]

The aims and objectives of the Institute are as follows[17]:

- To win the friendship and affection of villagers and cultivators by taking a real interest in all that concerns their life and welfare and by making a lively effort to assist them in solving their most pressing problems.
- To take the problems of the village and the field to the classroom for study and discussion and to the experimental farm for solution.
- To carry the knowledge and experience gained in the classroom and the experimental farm to the villagers, in the endeavour to improve their sanitation and health; to develop their resources and credit; to help them to sell their produce and buy their requirements to the best advantage; to teach them better method

[14] Sudhir Sen, *Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction*, 1991 (Revised), pp. 150–151.

[15] Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit., p. 287.

[16] RNT, *Visva-Bharati Bulletin*, No. 11, 1928, p. 1.

[17] RNT, *Visva-Bharati Bulletin*, No. 6, 1925.

of growing crops and vegetables and of keeping livestock; to encourage them to learn and practise arts and crafts; and to bring home to them the benefits of associated life, mutual aid and common endeavour.

- To work out practically an all-round system of elementary education in the villages based on the Boy Scout ideal and training, with the object of developing ideas of citizenship and public duty such as may appeal to the villagers and be within their means and capacity.
- To encourage in the staff and students of the Department itself a spirit of sincere service and willing sacrifice in the interests of and on terms of comradeship with their poorer, less educated and greatly harassed neighbours in the villages.
- To train the students to a due sense of their own intrinsic worth, physical and moral, and in particular, to teach them to do with their own hands everything which a village householder or cultivator does or should do for a living, if possible, more efficiently.
- To put the students in the way of acquiring practical experience in cultivation, dairying, animal husbandry, poultry-keeping, carpentry, smithing, weaving, tanning, practical sanitation work and in the art and spirit of cooperation.
- To give the students elementary instruction in the sciences connected with their practical work to train them to think and record the knowledge acquired by them for their own benefit and for that of their fellowmen.

In Sriniketan, there were four kinds of programmes—(1) **research** comprising surveys of the villages to uncover the problems, and experiment with villagers in farms, workshops and laboratories. (2) **Education** included a range of activities: the social education of the villagers in order to make them aware and develop skills for self-help and cooperation; the training and education of the students and workers of the institute and other departments of Visva-Bharati with a view to arousing in them genuine interest in problems of villagers and common people and a desire to learn about them and help them in every way to reorient their life in a spirit of cooperation and fellowship; vocational education of trainees from neighbouring villages as well as from other parts of the country in various branches of agriculture, arts and crafts; and all-round education of the children of neighbouring villages in order to develop in them qualities of efficient citizenship and community leadership. (3) **Service** included demonstrating to the villagers better methods in agriculture and industries and extension services rendered by the students and workers of the institute towards maintenance of village roads, sanitation, health education and general amenities and entertainment; and finally (4) C**ommerce**—branches of the institute were to be run on a commercial scale with a view to giving employment to some of its trainees, and to their becoming economically self-sufficient.

The Sriniketan team was truly one of the international cooperations—Elmhirst, Pearson and Andrews from England; Kim Taro Kasahara, woodwork expert from Japan; nurse Gretchen Green from USA followed later by Dr. Harry Timbres and many years later, Miss Jeanson from Sweden who came as a weaving instructor; and from USA Dorothy Straight. The activities of Sriniketan for the above aims

and objectives were conducted by four departments: **agriculture**, **industries**, **village welfare** and **education** with some flexibility in the area of operations till 1941 after which there were some changes.

Agricultural activities in Sriniketan included 'farming, vegetable gardening, orchards, dairy and poultry with the later addition of sericulture and fishery. Soil depletion and erosion were a major problem of the area, and the methods such as crop rotation and use of organic fertilizer were introduced to the villagers through demonstrations and experiments on the Surul farm. Kasahara carried on successful experiments in the orchard and encouraged families to grow fruits and vegetables in their own courtyards. In attempting to forest the area and introduce new crops, the Sriniketan nursery provided seedlings and grafts for fruit trees at subsidized cost. The dairy section took charge of supplying milk for the institution, as well as carrying out breeding experiments and research on fodder production. … A sericulture farm for the production of raw silk was opened in conjunction with the government of Bengal agricultural department with the object of establishing sericulture as a village industry'.[18]

The revival of the cottage **industries** and crafts of the area was a major objective of Sriniketan through the Silpa Bhavana. Income from agriculture especially in a one-crop area (there was practically no irrigation other than the monsoon), like Birbhum, was understandably poor, and experts had felt that other means of income or livelihood were necessary. Also, the machine was overtaking handcrafted items and artisans were forced to abandon their crafts and migrate to urban centres as labour. The challenge was to reinvigorate the crafts and small industries and to design objects that would compete with to machine-made items in terms of design and novelty—this was the first expressions of 'beautility'! Along with the old crafts, some new ones were introduced. The crafts that were brought under the ambit of Sriniketan at one time or the other were weaving, tannery, leather-craft, carpentry, lacquer work, pottery, tile-making, cane-work, bookbinding, tailoring, and embroidery (called *kantha* usually executed with running stitch). With the installation of the dynamo in 1929 the mechanical workshop could be made functional and practical courses in carpentry, smithy, lathe work, polishing, grinding, fitting, etc., were organized. The Swedish sloyd system of handicraft was introduced in weaving in 1932. Apprentices were trained here who later were able to earn their livelihood from their crafts with the training they had received in Sriniketan. The products of Sriniketan became known for their design and quality. In spite of the fact that the commercial aspect was subordinate to the educational goals, the Silpa Bhavana 'was found to be one of the best paying sections'.[19]

The aim of the **village and welfare department** was twofold: to render all possible service to the villagers to solve their problems particularly to generate in them the spirit of self-help which would lead them to solve these problems through their own cooperative efforts. The department also served as the

[18] Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit., p. 290.

[19] P. C. Lal, *Reconstruction and Education in Rural India*, 1932, p. 124.

chief arm of extension by which the experience and findings of the various other departments were carried to the neighbouring villages for practical utilization on the one hand and on the other brought the problems of the villages to the various departments for discussion and solution. Thus, this department occupied a key position in the institute. Some of its other activities were rural survey and economic research through direct data collection as the need to learn before providing service was the golden rule. Tagore had repeatedly stressed the danger of inexpert service. Even as early as the Selaidaha days, he had surveys of the villages conducted in order to assess the standard of living, the economics of paddy cultivation, marketing of rice, etc. and thus deduce what help was necessary. Improvements in the agricultural pursuits and the industries were constantly being made as these were considered as fundamental to village economics. The results of the experience and findings were carried to the villages so that better methods of farming and useful industrial pursuits could be developed.

The other work was on **education** that included primary education for rural children through a number of night schools and a day school for girls. By 1940, there were almost 16 night schools with over 450 students while about 30 odd girl students were enrolled in the girls' school. The syllabus included the three R's, some useful crafts and some recreational activities; the girls were taught house-craft and gardening. Adult men and women also attended the night schools. There was a rural circulating library; lantern lectures and conferences as well as traditional readings and recitations from the epics and scriptures, *kirtans* (devotional singing) and performance of *jatras* or folk plays were arranged. The department of sanitation and health aimed at improving hygiene, nutrition and management of recurring diseases like malaria as already mentioned above. The jungles and bushes were cleared, the drains were cleaned and dug and medical services were organized. Dr. Harry Timbre gave a great impetus to the health initiative on his arrival in 1932; there were three health cooperatives that had been set up following the experience of such organizations in Yugoslavia. Trained midwives were attached to the medical centres. The women of each village were grouped together in a 'Mahila Samiti', and there were experts in needle work who would train women in tailoring and there were some teachers who trained women in tending their kitchen gardens so that they were able to provide nutritious food to their families.

In 1930, when Tagore visited Russia, he was greatly impressed with the giant cooperatives and he wrote, 'In our country, in every village, let the cooperative principle prevail in producing and distributing wealth… I believe that the village will succeed in rescuing its manifold power from the sinking state only through the method of cooperation'.[20] Apart from the health cooperatives mentioned above, many cooperative societies were formed—Weavers' Societies; Anti-malaria Societies, Irrigation Societies, Cooperative Stores, *Dharma-golas* (Cooperative Paddy-storing Societies), etc. During disasters such as floods or draughts, the department organized relief work; the department also organized entertainment

[20] RNT, *Russia-r Chithi*, 1931, RR, Volume 10, 1989.

and other amusements for the villagers on various occasions with cultural events and traditional performances.

Tree planting was a very popular and well-loved programme in the villages in which the youth of the village participated. From the very first year of Sriniketan, the youth of villages were targeted as the vehicles of change and it was found necessary to organize them. With the help of Elmhirst, the idea of boys' and girls' troops on the line of the Scout movement was given shape, and *Brati Balak* and *Brati Balika* troops were formed with boys and girls, respectively. The Scout movement was adapted to Indian village conditions and needs. The troops thus formed became active in various works and tasks—one of their special duties was crowd management during the annual winter fair or Pous Mela in Santiniketan as well as in mobilizing medical aid and cleaning of jungles and digging of drains. Joining the troops meant taking part in physical activities and exercise and these led the young to keep themselves clean and healthy; appear smart and alert, be disciplined and take on leadership roles. The scouts received help and cooperation from every department in Sriniketan as a result of which they were trained in some crafts and gardening that was to their advantage. In the villages around Sriniketan, there are some old Bratis who still continue to do something useful for the community they live in.

Tagore wrote, 'It is well known that the education which is prevalent in our country is extremely meagre in the spread of its area and barren in its quality. Outside of the *bhadralok* class … there is a vast, obscure multitude who cannot even dream… with them we have our best opportunity if we know how to use it … I have generally noticed that when the charity-minded, city-bred … talk of education for the village folk, they mean a little left-over in the bottom of their cup, after diluting it copiously… unmindful of the fact that the kind and amount of food … needful for mental nourishment, must not be apportioned … according to the social status of those that receive it'.[21] Siksha Satra or the school from where free education was imparted was an answer to this kind of attitude towards the rural people. This school set-up in 1924 under the leadership of Elmhirst started with six destitute village boys so that they would be provided the education by which they would come to be of use in their villages by becoming enlightened leaders and take responsibility of the various village welfare works. There was a distinct influence of Elmhirst's teachers, Dewey and Kilpatrick[22] in the syllabus and methods of teaching followed in the school. Elmhirst was joined for a while by Arthur Geddes,[23] son of Patrick Geddes, who played a role in giving the school a definite leaning towards 'learning by doing' and the project method or activity-centred education. The subjects were given a different orientation from that followed in conventional schools—and to quote Elmhirst, 'Geology becomes the study of the fertility of the plot; Chemistry, the use of lime and manures of all kinds, of sprays and disinfectants; Physics, the use of tools, pumps, the study of

[21] RNT letter to Elmhirst, 19 December 1937 cited in Satyendranath Ray (ed.) *Rabindranather Chinta Jagat: Siksha Chinta*, 1982, pp. 324–325.

[22] For details on Dewey and Kilpatrick see Chap. IV.

[23] Bashabi Fraser (ed.), *A Meeting of Two Minds: Geddes Tagore Letters*, 2005.

water-lifts and oil-engines; Entomology, the control of plant pests and diseases; Ornithology, the study of birds in their relation first to the garden plot and then to the world in general'.[24] The achievements of the students of Siksha Satra in a matter of two years was remarkable, 'The gain of the boys in height, weight and strength has been very remarkable. The boys have made considerable progress in gardening, weaving and construction; they cut and sew and make their own garments, their own tables and boxes, can cook well, as well as paint, write a neat hand in Bengali, recite poems, know addition, multiplication, subtraction and division, not mechanically but in relation to life situations'.[25] Sriniketan started in 1937 a Primary Teachers' Training Institute named Siksha Charcha following the prescribed curriculum of the Government of Bengal with certain touches of its own such as instruction in music, agriculture, hygiene and sanitation, scouting, principles of rural reconstruction and allied subjects. Certainly this was not paralleled in any other training institution.

One of the most innovative plans for mass education was conceived by Tagore under the name of the Loka Siksha Samsad. This was a plan to educate those people who were not able to avail of the usual means of education but was interested in being educated. In order for this scheme to materialize it was planned to start centres for both home study and examination at three levels: matriculation, intermediate and undergraduate and the syllabus included Bengali language and literature; history; geography; arithmetic; general knowledge, elementary Hindi, hygiene and science in different combinations for different standards. Books for the subjects from the lowest to the highest standard were prescribed; also, some reading materials were prepared. Visva-Bharati undertook the publication of a series of books under the title of Loka Siksha Granthamala on various subjects of scientific and general interest written in easy language for the general public. This was modelled on the lines of the Home University Library. Records of the past 20 years up to 1957 of the Loka Siksha Sansad indicate that 'a total number of 14,686 private students registered as candidates for its various examinations out of whom 9,152 actually appeared and 5,689 passed. In 1957, 410 centres were recorded as registered under the society, of which about 300 were regarded by its workers as functioning more or less effectively…'.[26]

5.3 Today and Tomorrow

The scheme for mass education that started in 1937 continuing till 1957 could not sustain itself beyond that. That it ran for 20 years was no less surprising. Many changes occurred after Tagore passed away in 1941; primarily, funds were not so forthcoming, and India was going through a turbulent period of freeing itself from

[24] L. K. Elmhirst, *Visva-Bharati Bulletin*, No. 9, July 1946, p. 21.

[25] Report of Santosh Chandra Mazumdar, in-charge Siksha Satra, cited in Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindra Jibani*, Volume 4, 2009, p. 119.

[26] H. B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, 2013, pp. 227–228.

the yoke of foreign rule and transiting to self-rule which it achieved with its independence in 1947. In 1951, Visva-Bharati became recognized as a Central University by an act of Parliament, and later, the institution came under the purview of the University Grants Commission established in 1958. The rule of averages and uniformity applied itself, and every effort was made on the part of the government body and on the part of the then management of the University to bring Visva-Bharati at 'par' with other universities as much as possible and as quickly as possible. The programmes of rural reconstruction suffered the most, though the then Vice-Chancellor, Rathindranath Tagore, the poet's son, had made valiant efforts to keep alive the works undertaken earlier. He and his wife, Pratima, made spirited efforts to continue their work to keep alive the industries department in the area of crafts by many innovations in design and the creation of products; especially noteworthy were leather-craft, batik, bookbinding, lacquer work, needlework, pottery and furniture. Funds were generated through sale of the products. Some follow-up studies available of those times of the economic condition of villages clearly showed a noticeable improvement in lifestyle and in standard of living as well as in education. The studies also indicated that some democratic systems were in operation reflecting Tagore's mission of rural rejuvenation.[27]

One of the most comprehensive accounts of Sriniketan post-1941 and later 1951 is available from the work of Sudhir Sen who succeeded to the post of Director, Sriniketan, in 1939.[28] He was witness to the already-stultified state of work at Sriniketan due to lack of funds and proper manpower. After the poet's death in 1941, his son, Rathindranath, despite his efforts had to take on the reins of Visva-Bharati and had his hands full with keeping alive the education programme at Santiniketan. Elmhirst's four years in Sriniketan had not been enough to deal with all the problems of rural neighbourhood of Visva-Bharati.

At the present moment, Sriniketan is made up of a cluster of Institutes/Bhavanas and Centres engaged in tackling the different aspects of rural rejuvenation and reconstruction in keeping with their individual disciplinary orientation effecting an integrated and multi-pronged approach. It may be said that physically, the Sriniketan Experiment is housed in Sriniketan while spiritually, it is spread in the 40–50 villages surrounding the campus. The Institutes are the following: Institute of Rural Reconstruction or the Palli Samgathana Vibhaga under which there are the Department of Social Work; the Department of Rural Development (Palli Charcha Kendra); and the Department of Craft and Design or Silpa Sadana. The Rural Extension Centre includes the Centre for Lifelong Education. The Institute of Agriculture (Palli Siksha Bhavana) includes the departments of Agronomy, Soil Science, Agricultural Engineering, Plant Physiology and Animal Science (ASEPAN); Crop Improvement, Horticulture and Agricultural Botany (CIHAB); Plant Protection, Agricultural Entomology and Plant Pathology (PP); and Agricultural Extension, Economy and Statistics (EES). The academic support units are Dairy and Poultry Farms, Soil Testing Laboratory and Rathindra Krishi Vijnan Kendra (named after Tagore's son Rathindranath).

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[27] Sugata Dasgupta, *A Poet and a Plan*, 1962, Calcutta, pp. 112–113.

[28] Sudhir Sen, op. cit.,

Siksha Satra, the school as mentioned above, is situated in Sriniketan; today, it is the counterpart of the Patha Bhavana, the original school constituting the core asrama at Santiniketan. The school, Siksha Satra, has a kindergarten section called the Santosh Pathsala. The original plan of the school has undergone a sea change. However, Sriniketan in general maintains a balance between academic activities and extension. Thus, the syllabus offered in the various departments and institutes of Sriniketan combine course curriculum that is underpinned with exposure of students, faculty and support staff to rural situations, communities and local governance with a view to interface, interaction and exchange as we can gauge from the description of the departments and institutes above.

Once a university launches a regular teaching programme, there is a change in focus from doing to learning—the emphasis shifts to theoretical teaching with the field becoming the supporter/validator of theory. The process of learning seems to become prioritized and effecting change in the village conditions becomes secondary. As a result of this, possibility of piecemeal measures being adopted proves somewhat ineffective in bringing about change in villages. The solutions for many of the village problems lie more in coordination, cooperation and integration of efforts that are possible to be lost in the zeal to train students in particular intervention skills and strategies. In other words, the village becomes hypothesized.[29] What is overlooked is that a web of interconnectedness and dependence underlined by a sense of continuity exists in the causation of human conditions.

The country was even more rural in composition than what it is today or has been since independence. Since independence, there has been unprecedented urbanization and the very nature of villages has changed or they are in the processes of change. The aspirations of villagers, the economy that they pursued, the intergenerational gap expressed in cultural practices and values, the attitudes towards polity/governance, all have been palpably transformed and in many instances eroded the relatively 'stable' base of rural community life. The sociological and historical instruments that we so readily use and apply today to nation building, such as polity as a social institution, citizenship,[30] constitutional rights, national economy, education policy, social justice, human rights, were not so universally applicable then or perceived in quite

[29] My experience of teaching in the department of Social Work situated in Sriniketan for the past 34 years has made me conscious of the transformation from *doing* to *learning*. As an academic department, it is in the interest of the students to equip them in every way so that they have the skills to handle any kind of situation in places not necessarily the local areas for which reason the problems of the village are not contextualized in the immediate environs but are often 'seen' in a larger context, thereby somewhat losing out on solutions. For more details, see Sherry Joseph and Prasanta Ghosh, *Sriniketan: From Experiment to Experience*, 2002.

[30] Andre Beteille, (2011), 'Caste and the Citizen', in *Science and Culture*, Volume 77, No. 3–4, March–April 2011, p. 84. It is posited that the distinction in the representation of Indian society highlights the crucial difference in the approach to Rural Reconstruction then and now as, "… two representations of society … in contemporary India. The first is the representation of India as a society of castes and communities and the second its representation as a nation of citizens. The first had its roots in immemorial tradition… The second is of more recent provenance and derives its legitimacy from the Constitution of India… it was the group and not the individual that counted in the traditional social order."

the same way. In other words, our perception of contemporary needs, aspirations, opportunities, expectations, demands, sense of identity (intertwined with political, regional, religious, linguistic, caste, class, besides scheduled categories of castes and tribes) and sense of individual agency and capacity to negotiate sociopolitical situations, are incomparable on more grounds than ever before.

The questions then arise—what is the situation now and what are the factors that have changed our activities? I would like to compare the work that used to be performed then against the work that is done now in order to address the fundamental issues involved:

- Since the institutionalization of the Five-year Plans agriculture and related activities are looked after by government bodies such as the Block Development; paddy is cultivated twice a year in many areas; multi-cropping is a norm and irrigation is through widespread government and limited private initiative.
- Village sanitation, drainage, village roads and other public facilities and services, etc. are the designated activities of the Panchayati Raj Institutions which earmark budgetary provisions for these works.
- Education, at least primary and high school education are matters of the State and there are Primary, Secondary and High School Boards which look after recruitment and training of teachers, syllabi, etc. of schools and admission criteria for students.
- Health too is a matter of State—midwife training, integrated child development programmes, immunization all have their own infrastructure and trained personnel.
- Livelihood training is looked after by the Block Offices through Panchayati tiers[31]; small, medium, large banking and industrial support systems are there to offer loans, expertise, etc. for entrepreneurship development.

The list can be extended so as to envelop most of the community life within the ambit of the State or its arms. These were some of the core areas of the Sriniketan Experiment as has been shown throughout this chapter; however, at present, the Institute of Rural Reconstruction through its Rural Extension Centre is not directly involved in these programmes as a direct service provider that it was to some extent in the past. Rather, it has now shifted to partnering with the Block Offices and other government arms of administration so that some of the above activities are monitored or overseen jointly with the State. From being a direct service provider, the university has taken on a role overseeing the implementation of the spirit rather than the letter of the government plans, policies, etc.

There is ample scope, however, for the university to create that space in partnership with the State within which the university is able to play a significant role in implementing the government's Five-year Plan Programmes as well as maintain

[31] Institutions of local governance in the rural areas of India are referred to as Panchayats. The Constitution of India visualizes Panchayat as a 3-tier system of self-governance at the levels of the village, block and district. This is the largest experiment in formal decentralization of governance in the known history of humanity. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_self-government_in_India.

the core values of the poet. Rabindranath was very conscious of the limitations of Sriniketan's 'penetration' due to financial constraints, and this limited the accessibility of reaching large numbers of villages or people. In the light of this, the move to limit the work of Sriniketan to its present state seems judicious. However, Sriniketan is conscious of the fact that Rabindranath would not have wanted the unimaginativeness of the State's mechanized processes prescribing the same medicine for all and it is for this reason that Sriniketan has endeavoured to temper its activities with the guiding principles of more people-driven plans and activities. It has brought its activities and interests to bear more on the cultural and social aspects of development of the person and community life, the youth and women. It devolves upon Visva-Bharati to choose those aspects generally ignored by the State. The work of Sriniketan acquires significance because of its focus on the factors contributing to the development of the complete personality as envisaged through the Tagorean principle of education and extension of the self.

I shall sum up with a poem of Tagore's:

> I live in a small corner in the perpetual exile of prestige, seated by a narrow window on society's high platform.
>
> Sometimes I have ventured near their homes but have lacked the courage to enter ….
>
> Come, poet of mute, obscure men, give voice to their hidden sorrow, fill with life and joy this dry, songless land, release the spring in its heart.[32]

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[32] RNT, 'Poet of Man', tr. Humayun Kabir, in Humayun Kabir (ed.) *Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 240.

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Chapter 6
Conclusion: The Home and the World

Abstract Rabindranath's adventure in the ideas and practices of education was a long one, and for him, it was a way of life. Education informed all his other ideas and concepts some of which were nationalism, internationalism, truth, beauty, creativity and rural reconstruction. He sublimated his childhood memories of learning in a dreary, lifeless and joyless ambience of closed classrooms, insensitive teachers and unrealistic curriculum into the establishment of a unique school. This is a lesson for us in the limitless possibility of a creative and productive mind. In this chapter, the various strands of Tagore's philosophy have been isolated and then knit into a gestalt that describes the emergence of the complete individual and the fullness of the society to which the individual belongs. The isolated strands—education of the body and the senses; education of the intellect; education of the spirit and cultivation of feeling; education and nature; education and internationalism/universalism and education for the extension of self that are analysed at the levels of idea; manifestation and function. This chapter also critiques the poet's plan in the context of the present.

Keywords Education and nature • Critique of nationalism • Extension of self and public space • Sriniketan and its effect

> … Today when the door of the playhouse opens I shall make my final bow, and leave behind in the temple of the earth my offerings of a life time that no death can touch.[1]

I

Rabindranath's adventure in the ideas and practices of education was a long one, and it would not be erroneous to say that thinking about education and giving those ideas shape and application became for him a way of life. Education for Tagore informed all the other ideas and concepts he engaged with—ideas of nationalism,

[1] Rabindranath Tagore (henceforth RNT), 'The Final Offering', tr. Somnath Moitra, Humayun Kabir (ed.) *Poems of Rabindranath*, p. 245.

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internationalism, truth, beauty, nature, creativity and rural reconstruction, to mention some of them. Education encompassed all these concepts and more, and one can discern in the gestalt a pattern in which all these strands were interwoven. Education for Tagore was a serious business to which he devoted his energy, creativity and resources—remarkable for a poet. That the painful memories of childhood experience of learning in a dreary, lifeless and joyless ambience of closed classrooms, insensitive teachers and unrealistic curriculum could be so positively sublimated to lead to the establishment of a school, unique in nature, which holds for us an important lesson of the power and limitless possibility of a productive mind. Tagore reminded us again and again of his personal misadventures in education, but in taking a long-distance view of his works and achievements, we see his ideas unshackled from the limitations of the self, as if his self was in service to the ideas instead of the ideas serving the self. Tagore had discovered the two magic wands—*ananda* or joy and *srijanata* or creativity that released the self from the bondages of the self. Joy and creativity for him were the penultimate aims of education that went in the making of the complete person universal in character and purpose.

The Tagore family, its heritage and its involvement in all things social provided him the highway and the means for his endeavours;

> I was brought up in an atmosphere of aspiration, aspiration for the expansion of the human spirit. We in our house sought freedom of power in our language, freedom of imagination in our literature, freedom of souls in our religious creeds and that of mind in our social environment. Such an opportunity has given me confidence in the power of education which is one with life and only which can give us real freedom, the highest that is claimed for man, his freedom of moral communion in the human world.[2]

Tagore must have been struck with the problems of education in his early adulthood years when he was involved in looking after the family estates that provided him intimate knowledge of the miserable condition of decaying life in Bengal and being deeply shocked by the extreme inertia, superstition, cowardice and the defeatism and frustration of the vast rural population of the country. He was equally shocked by the lamentable intellectual shallowness, utter lack of initiative and an increasing indifference among the educated section of the people to the interests and welfare of the vast masses of people belonging to the villages and to the lower strata of society. All these evils he regarded as owing to the lack of proper education.

6.1 Major Aspects of Tagore's Educational Philosophy

While trying to isolate the various threads of Tagore's philosophy of education, we would first notice the dominant pattern of the total fabric or the leitmotif—education was for fullness of the individual and of the society to which the individual belonged. Education equipped the individual to channelize creativity born out of

[2] RNT, 'Ideals of Education', Lecture delivered in Tokyo, 3 June, 1929, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 3 (henceforth EWRT3), p. 611.

joy and an urge for *extension of self* for the benefit of others. Through this process, it was expected that the society would be transformed to be more just, humane, equitable and nurturing and that the relationship between the individual and society was reciprocal and mutually supportive. The various threads, or aspects of Tagore's educational philosophy, that coalesced into this leitmotif were as follows: *education of the body and the senses*; *education of the intellect; education of the spirit and cultivation of feeling; education and nature; education and internationalism/universalism and education for the extension of self.* Education of the body included physical fitness, physical exercise, training of the senses and efficiency and skill; education of the intellect included a constant curiosity and alertness, a scientific and rational outlook and independence of thinking; education of the spirit pertained to ethics and spirituality and the belief that there was a universal spirit that linked and permeated all life and objects; education and internationalism posited that education for fullness was to be achieved in and through the entire humanity and education for the extension of self includes the idea of the application of knowledge as well as the attitudes ensuring that sympathy and empathy between man and man guide the application of knowledge. The strands were in no way discrete but interconnected with each other.

The above aspects are being analysed at three levels: level of the idea (philosophy); level of manifestation (structural requirements); and the level of function (perpetuation) that I will illustrate with an analysis of the physical aspect or education of the body. Tagore believed that the body was as important in education as the intellect or the mind and that the little child learned with the entire body in which the sense organs played an important role. This has been seen as the philosophical underpinning of the aspect. At the structural or manifestation level, Tagore in his school had arranged for the scope of physical movement by changing the classrooms as well as providing varied stimulation of the senses when the children observed and noted the variegated natural environment, they were exposed to be composed by different trees, plants, places and people. The whole school was organized as a series of movement from one place to another, from one situation to another and from one activity to another. At the functional level, the pupils were made to exercise in natural ways by taking walks, making observations of common people in motion when at work and nature, and taking notes while walking, excursions, picnics, etc—a combination of activities involving the dual function of body and mind.[3]

Of the aspects of Tagore's educational philosophy, I have chosen here to discuss and elaborate upon education and nature; education and internationalism/universalism; and education for the extension of self. Education of the body and the senses; education of the intellect; and education of the spirit and cultivation of feeling have been dealt with in Chap. 3 and will not be repeated here. In the case of education for the extension of self, I have endeavoured to add dimensions other than those dealt with in Chap. 4.

[3] See L. K. Elmhirst, 'Movement in Education', EWRT4, pp. 629–634.

6.2 Education and Nature

In Tagore's scheme of education for a full life, nature had a pre-eminent position. Tagore's philosophy of nature was inspired and influenced by various factors chief among them was an idea of a supreme being that enveloped the whole of nature from the first days of creation. His yearning for the call of nature, his sense of excitement at the beginning of each new day and his eagerness to greet the rising sun, how he was moved to the magic of poetry by the simple imagery of the rain and the trembling leaves, his sense of wonder and joy in discovering the life on the banks of a river and his encounter with nature in the lap of the Himalayas were poignantly recorded in his autobiographies, *Jivan Smriti* and *Chelebela*.[4] Tagore's account when he was 18 years old of how one day at break of dawn the scales fell from his eyes and he could see the beauty of the whole world with his whole being and how in a rush he composed the wonderful poem *Nirjharer swapnabhanga*[5] would convince all of the sensitivity of Tagore towards nature and the importance he assigned to such experiences. Many years later, he explained his concept of 'God of his life' in the following words, 'I felt sure that some Being who comprehended me and my world was seeking his best expression in all my experiences, uniting them into an ever-widening individuality which is a spiritual work of art. To this being I was responsible; for the creation in me is his as well as mine. It may be that it was the same creative Mind that is shaping the universe to its eternal idea; but in me as a person it had one of its special centres of a personal relationship growing into a deepening consciousness.….It gave me great joy to feel in my life detachment at the idea of a mystery of a meeting of the two in a creative comradeship. I felt that I had found my religion at last, the religion of Man in which the infinite became defined in humanity and came close to me so as to need my love and cooperation'.[6]

In the realm of education, Tagore stated that 'Education divorced from Nature has brought untold harm to young children'. He further observed, 'If an ideal educational institution has to be founded, arrangement should be made away from human habitation, in solitude, under the open sky, on a wide field, amidst trees and plants'.[7] So far, as Tagore's school in Santiniketan was concerned, it was founded in beautiful and wild natural surroundings where children could enjoy full freedom and be happy. In a letter, Tagore wrote about the education of his pupils at Santiniketan as 'the cultivation of the love of nature and sympathy with all living

[4] RNT, *Jivan Smriti* (1912) or *My Reminiscences*, tr. Surendranath Tagore, 2008 and *Chelebela* (1939) or *Boyhood Days*, tr. Radha Chakravarty, 2007.

[5] RNT, 'Morning Songs', *Introduction to Tagore*, pp. 3–4. Tagore gives an account of how he composed the poem, *Nirjharer swapnabhanga,* or the 'Awakening of the waterfall', tr. Fakrul Alam, Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, 2011, pp. 205–206.

[6] RNT, 'The Vision', the Hibbert Lectures, *Religion of Man*, 1931, in EWRT3, pp. 122.

[7] RNT, 'Siksha Samasya', *Siksha*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, (henceforth RR), Volume 6, 1988, p. 582.

creatures'.[8] The festivals celebrating nature (*Vasantotsava*, *Varshamangala*); the performance of the Tagore plays themed on nature (*Saradotsava*, *Phalguni*, *Nataraj O Riturangasala,* etc.); and the countless songs of seasons brought the children in close meaningful contact with nature. Also, something could be said about the paraphernalia-less atmosphere of Santiniketan and Sriniketan—almost all the decorations for the festivals and functions were done with objects and items collected from the environment—flowers and leaves and even the trees were used as part of the setting and decoration. The children were thrown upon their own resources and the resources of the place to realize a sense of the aesthetic in all their activities, and the children learned this from an early stage through participation and taking responsibility of organizing functions and festivals. This is done even today.

The idea of the union of nature and man was an important idea of Tagore. He has explained this union not as a passive and loving enjoyment of nature's beauties and material gifts but of discovering the secrets of nature and to acknowledge that amidst all the distractions and conflicts of human life, nature silently performing its own eternal task.[9] Tagore had written that nature represents the spirit of synthesis; it offers to the child a joyous world and that the child has a powerful attraction to nature. He believed, 'The same eternal life beats in the depths of every pulse of Nature. That pulse beat quickens the spirit of the child'.[10]

6.3 Education and Internationalism/Universalism

In order to understand Tagore's ideas of internationalism, it is necessary to understand his idea of nationalism. Tagore for long had questioned the premises of nationalism as contrasted to the idea of a country. He objected to nationalism as it was divisive, narrow and limiting, while the concept of a country 'did not require an essential and singular cultural foundation for the people.… Rabindranath characterized India as an unbounded land, an open culture eternally accepting others and refreshing its sources with plural and new streams'.[11] Tagore had insisted 'We have no word for Nation in our language. When we borrow this word from other people, it never fits us'.[12] In three seminal essays,[13] Tagore expressed concern for

[8] Letter of Tagore cited in K.S. Ramaswami Sastri, *Sir Rabindranath Tagore*, 1916.

[9] Cf. H. B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, 2013, p. 293.

[10] RNT, 'Asramer Siksha', *Siksha*, RR, Volume 16, 2000, pp. 348–349.

[11] Tanika Sarkar, *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, 2009, pp. 231–232.

[12] R. K. Prabhu and Rabindra Kelkar (eds.), *Truth Called Them Differently: Tagore-Gandhi Controversy*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1961, p. 121.

[13] 'Nationalism in the West'; 'Nationalism in Japan' and 'Nationalism in India' all included in EWRT2.

the concept of nation as being, 'one of the worst products of the west [that reduced] all individuals to a mediocre sameness'.[14] Tagore felt that India was geographically too large and racially too diverse for a single Indian identity.[15]

Tagore was deeply influenced by the universalism of Indian philosophy and believed that man's striving for the infinite was the highest aim of life and education. The First World War and its aftermath fully laid bare all the evil features of nationalism against which he spoke in the strongest words. He did not see nationalism as an answer to any human problem. He firmly believed that nations were interdependent not only in their problems but in finding their solutions and that could happen only when those national boundaries were breached and there was cooperation in the field of knowledge and culture. This formed the foundation of Tagore's philosophy of internationalism or universalism. The genesis of Tagore's internationalism/universalism could be traced to the influences in his early formative life. Ram Mohun's liberal acceptance of the West for progressive reforms of the country was a major influence; Tagore's stay and studies in England in his growing years made him familiar with the liberal traditions of European thought as did his intensive reading of European thinking and literature. He believed that internationalism was a modern idea. 'The distinctive feature of Tagore's universalist approach was that it was wholly cultural, to the exclusion of political means. He wanted the world to look beyond national boundaries to the unity of mankind'.[16] The essential foundation of Tagore's internationalism was a call for harmony and cooperation of all peoples of the world.

'The defining and construction of a history of International Education, particularly as it predates the Second World War, has been a relatively recent phenomenon. In general, the movement for international education had in those times been linked to the humanist-progressive movement, which advocated a more democratic child-centered form of education and is indebted to such figures as Jean Jacque Rousseau (1712–1778), Johan Pestalozzi (1746–1827), Frederich Froebel (1782–1852) and others'.[17] One of the most important contributions to the history of International Education was of N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) from Denmark who established in 1856 the Folk Schools that were inclusive and egalitarian in structure of education.[18] The Committee on Intellectual Cooperation formed under

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[14] David W. Atkinson, 'Tagore and Gandhi: The Poet and the Pragmatist', VBQ, Volume 50, Numbers 1–4, May 1984–April 1985, p. 153.

[15] Ibid. p. 154.

[16] Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation*, 2011, p. 33.

[17] Kathleen M. O'Connell, 'Tagore as an International Educationist: The 'Bond of Relation' read at New Delhi at the ICWA conference on 9 May 2013 will be published, *Rabindranath Tagore-envoy of India: His Vision of India and the World*.

[18] Asoke Bhattacharya, *Education for the People: Concepts of Grundtvig, Tagore, Gandhi and Friere*, 2010, pp. 41–42. See also Ove Korsgaard, *The Struggle for the People: Five Hundred Years of Danish History in Short*, 2008, pp. 65–66.

the aegis of the League of Nations included noted intellectuals such as Einstein and Tagore's close friend, scientist Jagadish Bose, among others declared its purpose as follows:

> General cultures should make our pupils into men and women for whom internationalism, which we consider to be the outcome of individual nationalism, will become a reality, a second nature, a mode of their thought. We have to prepare a generation which will carry over on to the international plane ideas of brotherhood, understanding and mutual assistance.[19]

Educators such as the Geheebs (Paul and Edith), the Huxleys (Aldous and Dora), the Elmhirsts (Leonard and Dorothy), John Dewey, Maria Montessori and Rabindranath Tagore developed such a model of education. Rabindranath Tagore laid great emphasis on internationalism, social inclusiveness, human freedom, creativity in his own system of education and the ways in which he shaped his institution, Visva-Bharati. Tagore devoted a lot of his efforts towards building up East–West links through his visits and exchange of students and scholars with the countries such as Burma, Malaya, Indonesia, China and Japan. These visits of Tagore gave birth to the Asiatic Society in Shanghai; the Tagore Society in Tokyo; a Javanese dance teacher visited Visva-Bharati, and the Batik and the study of other arts and crafts from Indonesia were introduced in Visva-Bharati. The Visva-Bharati prospectus of 1929 stated:

> College students are expected to become familiar with the working of existing institutions and new movements inaugurated in the different countries of the world for the amelioration of the social conditions of the masses. They are also required to undertake a study of international organizations so that their outlook may become better adjusted to the needs of peace…. The aim of this education is to ensure that the students should, in thought, emotion and action, attain truth and achieve the fullest development in all the various manifestations of the human spirit'.[20]

I shall very briefly discuss how Tagore has been received in the South Asian countries especially Bangladesh, Pakistan[21] and Sri Lanka. Of the three countries, Bangladesh has enthusiastically and with fervour made Tagore a part of their cultural and intellectual lives; he occupies a huge cultural space in the entire nation. Bengali is the national language of Bangladesh, the national anthem adopted after their independence as a separate country in 1971 is one of Tagore's songs, and they fought their own war for independence from Pakistan with his songs and poems on their lips and in their hearts. Some of the gifted Rabindra Sangit exponents in contemporary times are from Bangladesh and where performances of his plays and dance-dramas are a regular feature. Pakistan became a sovereign country

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[19] Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit.

[20] Ibid. 'Santiniketan and the Educational Institutions', *Visva-Bharati Bulletin*, No. 12, February 1929, cited in Kathleen M.O'Connell.

[21] For details on Tagore and Bangladesh and Pakistan, see Anisuzzaman, 'Claiming and Disclaiming a Cultural Icon: Tagore in East Pakistan and Bangladesh', Kathleen M.O'Connell and Joseph T. O'Connell (eds.) *Rabindranath Tagore: Reclaiming a Cultural Icon*, 2009, pp. 377–389.

in 1947 divided into West and East separated by the vast plains of north India. Tagore was the bridge between the two halves with the Radio Pakistan featuring Tagore songs and other programmes on Tagore. However, for Pakistan, the story of Tagore became contentious—during the Indo-Pak war in 1965 and subsequently during the Bangladesh liberation movement in 1971, all programmes on Tagore were discontinued from government media. Besides a number of political issues, this invasion of the cultural space united the various, even disparate groups in the eastern part to make a bid for freedom. Now, Pakistan participates in the occasional commemoration of Tagore as other countries of the world do. Apart from the eastern states of India, Tagore elsewhere is celebrated occasionally. Tagore in parts of India is seen as a regional writer albeit of eminence.

Sri Lanka had enjoyed some links with Visva-Bharati with exchange of scholars between the two and the import of the Kandy dance form to Visva-Bharati. Tagore had inaugurated a Santiniketan like school in Sri Lanka in a place called Sri Palli from where a scholar had visited Visva-Bharati in the 1930s. Very recently, there has been some revival of the cultural links between the two with a cultural team from Visva-Bharati visiting some of the cities in Sri Lanka with their performances. There have been some students from Sri Lanka who have come to Visva-Bharati in the faculty of music and dance.

I shall conclude this section with a long quotation from Tagore stressing on the universal character of human knowledge and the need for worldwide intellectual cooperation:

> The messengers of truth have ever joined their hands across countries, across the seas, across historical barriers, and they help to form the great continent of human brotherhood. 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. We individuals, however small may be our power and whatever corner of the world we may belong to, have the claims upon us to add to the light of the consciousness that comprehends all humanity.'[22]

6.4 Extension of the Self, Inclusion and the Public Space

'The aim of education is always twofold: there is a collective aspect and there is an individual aspect'.[23] The individual can have two kinds of relationship with education—one is parasitic in which one uses knowledge as a means of personal growth and the other is symbiotic in which the individual sheds the light of his knowledge on others around him so that they are also brought into the light. Tagore had been concerned with the symbiotic aspect of education when he urged that it was the responsibility of every educated individual to extend himself or herself so that the not so fortunate could also be included in the halo of knowledge.

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[22] RNT, 'Ideals of Education' op. cit. pp. 612–613.

[23] P. B. Saint-Hilaire, *Education and the Aim of Human Life*, 2002, p. 4.

'One principle in human life is sociability. Man finds his true shelter in society through contact…. When man's relationship finds expansion in his surroundings, in his home and outside, the largeness of that relationship in itself pleases him. Our deep satisfaction lies in a relationship which is not based on any selfish consideration of utility, advantage or business, but on the bonds of kinship which transcends all self-centred interests'.[24]

What did Tagore create in his university through extension of the self into the community? In answer to this, it is posited that Tagore created a public sphere, in the meaning of 'the public use of reason, public accessibility, and public participation and … in anything that concerns anybody in the community'.[25] A university necessarily and naturally creates a public sphere in which through the web of interactions among its members, common pursuits are followed. Tagore went a little further than this—he wanted to include within the fold of the university those people who were not directly connected with the university. His net was cast wide and the communities around the university, especially the rural people in the neighbourhood were included in the ambit of the university through the systems of extension activities.

In the previous two chapters, we find description of the festivals and functions that Tagore organized in Visva-Bharati in order to embellish and imbue with richness the aesthetic and educative ambience of Visva-Bharati. The festivals helped to punctuate the ordinary routine of ashrama life.[26] These festivals were non-sectarian and non-religious in nature in which all could participate and have access. These festivals enabled people to enter the public sphere and space sans bias of caste, creed and even class; the appeal was to the aesthetic sense of people. People from near and far would come during the times of the festivals; there was no restriction in attendance.

In the work of rural reconstruction, Tagore created through various programmes of uplift, a level playing field so that the illiterate and the educated could enter into a meaningful dialogue and mutually address problems and confront situations so that the disadvantages of the illiterate are removed or ameliorated and they are able to retain their dignity and rights as human beings. The indigenous or folk aspects of culture were used as means of communication and mutual learning. In modern parlance of developmental studies, this would be called the 'strengths perspective' or the 'rights-based approach'. Tagore was indeed modern and far ahead of his time.

The plan for mass education under the aegis of the Loka Siksha Sansad was another very significant step in the creation of the public sphere. One could think of this as a precursor of distance education that has emerged as a popular and necessary aspect of the spread of education beyond the bounds of college and

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[24] RNT, 'Letters from Russia', *RR*, Volume 10, 1989, pp. 551–616.

[25] Pulak Dutta, 'Santiniketan: Birth of an Alternate Cultural Space', M.D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal (eds.) *Folklore, Public Sphere and Civil Society*, 2004, p. 157.

[26] Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindranath O Santiniketan*, 1975 (3rd Edition), p. 160.

university. Fairs were still another form of public culture that allowed more inclusive participation. Thus we see, Tagore worked on principles of inclusion addressing to a great extent, the unjust and incapacitating systems and mechanisms of exclusion already prevalent in Indian society and more so in rural society. Tagore's understanding of public sphere and space was based on ideas of inclusion, and this is more than apparent in the case of mass education. That a university took up the role of the public educator is not something that has been replicated by many other universities, and this fact needs to be recognized and appreciated. Visva-Bharati has indeed left its unique mark in the field of education in many forms. Visva-Bharati's ethos is palpable in the working of the organizations in the surrounding area some of which are mentioned below.

Over the years, in and around Santiniketan–Sriniketan, at the present moment, there are quite a number of organizations whose work has essentially been in social welfare and rural uplift; some of them are briefly described. The Elmhirst Institute of Community Studies (EICS), the Ghosaldanga Adivasi Seva Sangha (GASS), Antaranga School and Amar Kutir Society for Rural Development are a few of the significant organizations that have sustained over time. The EICS named after Elmhirst, the pioneer of Sriniketan, has completed almost twenty-five years of its existence; it works in the areas of family counselling: in-service training of the staff who work in the government department of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in the area of women and child health and nutrition. The health of women and children was one of the significant programmes under rural reconstruction. In recent years, EICS has been working in the AIDS programme. The family counselling centre works in close collaboration with the family and civil courts. EICS also has a short-stay home for abandoned women and women who are victims of domestic violence. The GASS is an organization of the Santals that, among programmes of rural uplift, is working in the area of primary education—imparting primary education to Santal children in their mother tongue through a non-formal free school, Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram for the last eighteen years.[27] The Santal children are taught through primers written in the Santali language, and this exposure to mother tongue in the early years of schooling makes it easier for them to transit to high school education in the Bengali medium. Tagore's principle of imparting education through the mother tongue has been successfully demonstrated through the efforts of this school. The curriculum and methods of education followed in the primary school have incorporated many of the other features of the Tagore model of education: art, music, dance, outings, picnics, tours and performances and organizing festivals and functions; the community in which the school is situated participates in many of these functions. Antaranga is a non-formal free school for those children who are out of the formal school system and whose parents are daily wage earners. This school is an instance of reaching out to the community so as to include those left out. The Amar Kutir Society for Rural

[27] For more details, see Boro Baski and Kumkum Bhattacharya (eds.) *Celebrating Life*: *The Santal Experiment in Freedom* (1996–2006), 2007.

Development was founded in 1978 by a freedom fighter who in his later life became a Gandhian. This is an organization under the small-scale industries in which various local crafts and arts are practised by men and women. The craftspeople are trained and commissioned to make items as per designs and requirement. This enterprise has empowered generations of craftspeople and has also trained and taught other interested people so that they are able to earn a reasonable livelihood. Over the years, Amar Kutir has made its reputation as a benchmark of innovation and quality in the field of arts and crafts. It had started its life as a cooperative society for rural livelihoods. Not only are the local crafts kept alive, but they are also continuously being modernized.

6.5 A Critique of the Poet and the Plan

As is evident from the previous sections, Rabindranath Tagore made every effort to give shape to his ideas and convictions through many programmes that were run in Visva-Bharati on several broad fronts—academic, cultural, social and economic; many of these programmes are still on though in new or altered forms. The programmes are multi-pronged in nature. However, a casual visitor to the university on any ordinary working day will not usually notice the expected bustle of activity that the myriad programmes would conventionally suggest; rather, the quotidian existence of the university persuades the visitor to feel a sense of relaxation and calm permeating the atmosphere; while on festival days, the university seems abuzz with activity and energy. Of course, we need to consider that the same levels of energy and activity that are associated with functions and festivals cannot be brought into play for academic, social and economic programmes and we also need to remember that a university is not expected to play to the gallery! Nevertheless, the perception of a sense of timelessness in Visva-Bharati is striking. Let us try to understand why this is so.

Some individuals and societies seem to eagerly embrace progressive ideas and strive towards modernity with some zeal, while there are other individuals and societies that are less enthusiastic about modernity and progressiveness and are not keen to upset the apple cart of tradition. Perhaps it is perceived that modernity and progressive ideas are threats to the sense of security and well-being. Those who embrace modernity do so at some cost to tradition—they transform, transmute and even jettison elements of tradition so as to create the ‘space’ and manage the content of the adopted elements of modernity. Modernity involves an evaluation and judgement tempered with aspiration, of the contemporary parameters and needs.

Is Visva-Bharati caught between opting for modernity and rooting for tradition? How else can we explain the fact of the university holding on to aspects that are generally considered as ‘Tagorean’ in character in following the letter while seeming to overlook the spirit of what Tagore was striving to do in Visva-Bharati that would have involved a dynamism and rethinking over and over again about the

existing paradigms in order to find newer and more effective solutions? Has Visva-Bharati been caught in a time warp? How does Visva-Bharati maintain its links with its tradition as well as confront modernity? These are not easy questions to answer; nevertheless, these are issues that are in the public domain. There are instances of Tagore transmuting certain aspects of tradition in his journey to modernity in the belief that modernity had need for a traditional base or foundation for it to develop and flourish. Rabindranath was modern in the true sense of the term; he had also claimed his allegiance to modernity. 'Tagore's educational work was quite in line with the best features of modern progressive education'.[28] Another author has perceptively remarked when he is asked, '… why Tagore was relevant even today, and also where his moorings were—in the oriental knowledge systems or in the western thoughts. …his brilliance was in arguing for a rare synthesis which was practically the beginning of global modernity'.[29] Has Visva-Bharati been able to proceed along the lines set by Tagore?

In his lifetime, Rabindranath with his dynamism, creativity and a remarkable ability to enthuse others[30] steered Visva-Bharati in uncharted channels and paths with the vision of the aspiration of the making of the complete individual. The question naturally arises whether this was sustained since his passing away and after Visva-Bharati became a recognized national institution. The answer to this is complex. Even during his lifetime, Tagore had admitted that he had not been able to fulfil the ideal that he had started with and that he had had to make compromises in certain aspects of his academic programme such as starting examinations, seeking affiliation for students to appear in public examinations thereby modifying the curriculum. While working on writing this book and my long association with the university, I increasingly feel that possibly Tagore would not have been quite happy (in some ways) with the way in which Visva-Bharati has been turned into a regular university though he would have been happy with the ripple effect this university especially Sriniketan has created in the surrounding areas. However, there is undoubtedly, as with most programmes, room for innovation, improvement and enhancement. He had appeared to be more confident of the success of Sriniketan, the work of rural reconstruction and of the school, Siksha Satra that has been reflected in his statement, 'I am all the more keen that Siksha Satra should justify the ideal I have entrusted to it, and should represent the most important function of Sriniketan, in helping students to the attainment of manhood complete in all its various aspects. … Sriniketan should be able to provide for its pupils an atmosphere of rational thinking and behaviour, which alone can save them from stupid

[28] H. B. Mukherjee, Op. Cit. p. 428.

[29] Udaya Narayana Singh, 'Tagore redrawing the boundaries: In other words, crossing the limits of language' in Sanjukta Dasgupta and Chinmoy Guha (eds.) *Tagore: At Home and the World*, 2013, p. 11.

[30] Pramathanath Bishi has eloquently highlighted how Tagore inspired the teachers of Santiniketan ashrama with his own sense of excitement in *Rabindranath O Santiniketan*, op. cit. p. 110.

bigotry and cowardliness. I myself attach much more significance to the educational possibilities of Siksha Satra than to the school and college at Santiniketan which are everyday becoming more and more like so many schools and colleges elsewhere in this country, borrowed cages that treat the students' minds as captive birds whose sole human value is judged according to the mechanical repetition of lessons, prescribed by an educational dispensation foreign to the soil….'[31] Tagore was being somewhat harsh on his institution; there were many unique features, and there are many even today.

Tagore's oeuvre in multiple genres over a long span of years, almost six decades of active writing, is indeed remarkable and in many ways, daunting; to critique Visva-Bharati that he claimed to be the 'vessel carrying the cargo of my life's best treasure'[32] is no less daunting. Going through Tagore's writings on education in both Bengali and English, one is amazed at the range and volume: essays in Bengali and countless letters, addresses, interviews and full-length essays in English. One has to also admire the sheer beauty of his prose. Apart from the use of metaphors and adages in his writing, Tagore is relatively direct and explicit in expressing his ideas. However, there are one or two issues that may be questioned for their tenability—Tagore seemed quite caught up with the idea of the ancient past being golden; in the context of India, the forest hermitage as a meaningful centre of learning was one such idea. It could be asked if at all they existed in the near or the distant past and how many boys and girls could have studied in those forest colonies—these had not been elaborated upon by Tagore. The exclusive character of the ashrama schools as described in the great Indian epics intrudes into our imagination, and it would be clear that not too many students could have been educated in such systems. That education in the ancient and golden past was indeed restrictive seems to have been overlooked by Tagore.

Tagore's experience in conventional schools became his benchmark for the negative influence of formal school, and he assumed this to be so for all children—he transposed his own sensitivity rather universally. No doubt, the school experience Tagore provided in contrast to those schools was one of joy, openness, creativity and freedom and this has been testified by many of the students who passed their lives in Tagore's school in Santiniketan. Tagore did not need to stress on this study in contrast to rationalize his ideas or practices as his ideas and practices were founded on valued and important educational principles. His faith in the vernacular medium has a rational basis and cannot be disputed for its efficacy; however, the difficulties in implementation cannot be ignored either. The multi-lingualism of India poses many serious problems in the implementation of education in mother tongue(s); I have discussed this issue at length in Chap. 3.

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[31] RNT's letter to L. K. Elmhirst, 19 December 1937, cited in Satyendranath Ray (ed.) *Rabindranather Chintajagat: Siksha Chinta*, 1982, p. 325.

[32] RNT's letter to M. K. Gandhi on 2 February 1940 carrying an appeal for Visva-Bharati to be made a national institution; Rabindra Bhavana archives, Visva-Bharati (henceforth RB), serial no. 128 of correspondence files.

6.6 Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) is undoubtedly one of the leading educationists of India and the world; he thought deeply about the situation and condition of education in the country during his time and envisaged and manifested a system that was not simply a reaction or response to the colonial powers in India but a system that transcended the borders of the country to become truly international or universal in substance and intent. He worked on his ideas for many years, gave shape to them in concrete terms and gradually provided an alternative model of education to the whole world. That he was perceptive and sensitive to the social–cultural milieu was established from his very early age. It can be said that Tagore started thinking about education from his youth and started giving shape to the ideas from when he turned 40. His initial work of manifesting his ideas started in the family estates in the late 1890s; however, that work could not be sustained.

Too often, Tagore is seen too much in the context of his times, while in reality, he had set his sights on a distant future when the colonial power would leave India and the country would be thrown upon its own resources for all the services and functions. He tried to prepare the Indian intelligentsia to be able to question and innovate existing systems, and create and sustain new models so that our educational aims are aspirational rather than imitational. Once the country would become free, there would be need for single-minded pursuit of knowledge, independent thinking, judgement and discernment in taste and nobility of sentiments. The path to these aims would admittedly be through education, but the task was to create or develop the appropriate educational systems that would foster these and more. These were some of the questions Tagore raised, addressed and demonstrated practically in the functioning of his institution, Visva-Bharati.

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