

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.

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 autobiography³ 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 Reminiscences*, 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

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

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

⁸ Tapan Raychaudhuri, '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 counter-productive 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 entertainment¹⁸ 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, Frankenthal 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 1901²¹ 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 tongue²²; 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 history²⁵ 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 land²⁹ 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 Mukhopadhyay 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.

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

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 - .

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, *Santiniketan 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 hall⁵⁹ 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.

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 Brahma Samaj (*Maghotsava*). The particular Sriniketan⁶⁰ 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.

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

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.

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 its 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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