

## Chapter 4

# Visva-Bharati: The Transnational Centre of Education

*Yatra visvam bhavatyekanidam*

The motto of Visva-Bharati; literal meaning of the Sanskrit phrase is '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

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.<sup>1</sup>

## 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’.<sup>2</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore (henceforth RNT), *An Eastern University, The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 2, (henceforth EWRT2), p. 557.

<sup>2</sup> 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...'.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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'.<sup>5</sup>

## 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

<sup>3</sup> RNT, 'My Educational Mission', *The Modern Review*, June 1931.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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'.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> RNT, 'The Centre of Indian Culture', op. cit. p. 482.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 469.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 469.

<sup>10</sup> 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...<sup>11</sup>

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...'<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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

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<sup>11</sup> RNT, 'The Centre of Indian Culture', op. cit. p. 469.

<sup>12</sup> RNT, 'An Eastern University', pp. 556–557.

<sup>13</sup> 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’.<sup>14</sup> 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’.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 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’.<sup>17</sup> 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

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<sup>14</sup> RNT, ‘The Problem of Education’ 1906, *Towards Universal Man*, 1961, Bombay, Asia, pp. 67–82.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 469.

<sup>16</sup> The school originally named Brahmacharyashram was renamed Patha Bhavana in 1925 by which name it is known today.

<sup>17</sup> ‘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'.<sup>18</sup> 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<sup>19</sup> into its social fabric. This in itself was the fare that could be given the appellation 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'.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> 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'.<sup>22</sup> 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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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp. 10–20.

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> RNT *Visva-Bharati*, 1919, RR, Volume 8.

<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> The constitution of Visva-Bharati is as follows<sup>24</sup>:

- 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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<sup>23</sup> Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindra Jivani*, Volume 3, 5th Edition, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> 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...’<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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’.<sup>27</sup> 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, craft-people 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

<sup>25</sup> RNT, Address to Asramik Sangha, *Praktani*, Santiniketan, Visva-Bharati, 23 December, 1921.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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<sup>28</sup>:

- 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

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<sup>28</sup> 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'.<sup>29</sup> 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'.<sup>30</sup>

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.

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<sup>29</sup> RNT, *The Centre for Indian Culture*, op. cit. p. 489.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 490.

But there is evidence of his keen awareness of the importance of a scientific attitude...'<sup>31</sup> 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<sup>32</sup> 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

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<sup>31</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *op. cit.* p. 196.

<sup>32</sup> 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'<sup>33</sup> 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 Geheebes. 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<sup>34</sup> between the Geheebes (Paul and Edith Geheeb) and Tagore revealed their mutual interests and the deep respect they had for each other. Tagore wrote to

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

<sup>34</sup> Letters between Tagore and Geheebes, 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 Geheebes 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.<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup>

'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...'<sup>37</sup>

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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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Cox, 'The Dartington Connection', Naresh Guha (ed.) *VBQ*, Volume 50, Numbers 1-4, May 1984-April 1985, pp. 122-128.

<sup>37</sup> 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'.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

## 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'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> 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.

<sup>40</sup> 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*<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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'.<sup>43</sup> 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'.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> RNT, 'Ma ma hingsi', *Santiniketan*, RR, (1914), Volume 8, 1988, pp. 675–677.

<sup>42</sup> 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.

<sup>43</sup> Lt. Col. Yeats Brown, *Visva-Bharati News*, February 1936.

<sup>44</sup> 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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