

Contribution of Rabindranath Tagore to the Field of Education Reform Movement on the 19th Century Bengal and the Impact of his Philosophy of Education on the then Bengal Society and Succeeding Generations

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Abstract:

On the 19th and early 20th century Indian society, Rabindranath Tagore played a pioneering role in expanding modern education and social mobilisation. His philosophy of education has been praised and accepted by all for better education of a country. After 76 years of his death, till today we need to implement his ideas of education to ensure quality education of a nation. The present study attempted to portray the contribution of Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengal Nobel laureate, to the field of Education Reform Movement during the 19th and early 20th century Bengal and to assess the impact of his philosophy of education on the then Bengal society and succeeding generations.

Key words.: Rabindranath Tagore, Education Reform Movement, Philosophy of education, Bengal society and succeeding generation etc.

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I. INTRODUCTION

When a new era was instigated in the 19th century Bengal, that time the western liberal ideas and thoughts entered into Bengal. The influx of western knowledge, art, culture and advanced moral values enriched the mental horizon of Bengal liberal intelligence. It influenced the scholars of that time to initiate social, religious and literary reformation to purge the evils from the then society, which arose from the ignorance and superstitious beliefs. Western knowledge also influenced them to improve the condition of common people in the light of western liberal knowledge and ideals. Rabindranath Tagore remained the key figure amongst the then humanitarian intellectuals of Bengal society. Rabindranath Tagore, the great scholar of India, dedicated himself towards setting up the education system of the country. He tried to reform the traditional mode of education and attempted to remove the veil of darkness from the mind of their countrymen. Rabindranath Tagore played a pioneering role in expanding modern education and social mobilisation during the nineteenth century Bengal.

Rabindranath Tagore's experiences at *Jorasanko* provided him with a lifelong conviction concerning the importance of freedom in education of a learner. He also realized in a profound manner that, the importance of the arts for developing empathy and sensitivity in a person and the necessity for an intimate relationship with one's cultural as well as natural environment. In participating in the cosmopolitan activities of his family, he rejected narrowness in general, and in particular, any form of narrowness that separated human being from human being. He saw education as a vehicle for appreciating the richest aspects of other cultures, while maintaining one's own cultural specificity (<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/tagore.htm>).

The nineteenth century is very much important for the people of Indian subcontinent because from the beginning of the nineteenth century, India experienced a socio cultural and intellectual awakening, which laid the foundation for the movement that transformed India to a modern nation. At that time, liberal tradition of Europe filtered through the prism of Bengal, deeply influenced this process of modernization. This flowering manifest itself in various spheres which questioned and shook the foundation of tradition in the spheres of social reformation, in religion, education, women's role and status, social practices, philosophy, art etc. (Amin,1989). During this period, European scientific knowledge and ideas began to influence the people of India. A number of remarkable intellectuals displayed a significant enthusiasm to absorb this knowledge like Raja Rammohan Roy, Akhay Kumar Dutta, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankeem Chandra Chattergy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Rabindranath Tagore and many other intellectuals of the Nineteenth century Bengal. Among them we would like to discuss the philosophical thought of education of great thinker Rabindranath Tagore and his contribution to the field of education reform movement on the 19th Century Bengal and the impact of his philosophy of education on the then Bengal society and succeeding generations in the present study.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

1. To discover the educational thought of Rabindranath Tagore;
2. To analyze the impact of his education on the then Bengal society and succeeding generation.

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III. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology of the study was exploratory and explanatory in nature and was based on documentary analysis. To conduct this research both primary (Books, Essays and articles written by Rabindranath Tagore) and secondary data (authentic writings, books, thesis, articles, documents etc. of eminent authors on Rabindranath Tagore and on present issue) were used.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Ideas of education and enthusiasm of Rabindranath Tagore were really fruitful and influential to the Indian people during the 19th and early 20th century Bengal. His contribution, for the salvation of his countrymen is really praiseworthy. He has inspired his countrymen in many ways adopting several strategic measures regarding education. He was the pioneer of Bengal Renaissance during that time. His theoretical and practical efforts helped to break the long-standing superstitions and bad practices that were devastating the Indian society. It is expected that the proposed research will clearly explore the role of philosophy of education of great thinker Rabindranath Tagore in the field of quality education in the 19th century Bengal and on the then Bengal society and succeeding generations.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the greatest son of India, is such a personality that everybody knows him as a poet of Bengal as well as an Indian great poet, prose writer, songwriter, composer, painter, essayist, philosopher, educationist, social reformer, and a humanist. The duration of Tagore's life was eight decades. Tagore started his career as a poet and turned out to be a learned person, educator, painter, social reformer and a philosopher of his time. It is basically as a poet that he gained fame all over the world and was also called 'The World Poet'. As the author of *Gitanjali* and its "profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse" ("*The Nobel Prize in Literature 1913*"), he was the first non-European who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 (O'Connell, 2008).

Tagore was a great educationist in India during his time. In his childhood he was not a regular student of school. So later he became his own teacher and also for mankind. He thought about Indian education from the very early stage of his life. As an educationist, he emphasized on the concept of complete education of a person and established Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan in 1927. It was the only place in India, at least in that time, where there were not any barriers for the students from any culture, religion or casts.

Tagore was a nationalist and humanist at the same time. As a philosopher, Tagore wanted to balance his passion for India's freedom struggle with his personal belief in universal humanism and his apprehensions about the excesses of nationalism. Yet he was a landlord, he did not think himself as a ruler. He assembled with the people very closely and wanted to know their feelings. He also wrote about their passions, sorrows, and sufferings and pleasures, everything. He refused his knighthood in protest against the barbarism of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre in Amritsar in 1919, where an

unarmed gathering was brutally shot by the British Brigadier-General, Reginald Dyer, killed nearly 1000 people and injuring more than 1500 (Banerjee, 2010).

Universalism is always found in all the works of Tagore and he was not confined in any religion, superstition or national fundamentalism. As he was born in India, for this his nationality was Indian. He was born in Maharishi Debendranath Tagore's family, so he was Brahma in religion. These are the external scenarios of Tagore. But his inner part is always universal. As a versatile genius, Tagore was playful in all kinds of writings. Songs, poetry, drama, novel, short story, painting - in every aspects of creativity, he was unique.

He did not like English medium schools for education. Rather he preferred mother tongue in education for his natives. He criticized the prevalent system of English education in the then India in his essay *Sikhshar Herfer* (Vagaries of Education). As a part of his anti-colonial educational experiments, Tagore set up two unique schools, Patha Bhavan and Sikha satra and also an international University, *Visva-Bharati* at Santiniketan.

As a great traveler, Tagore travelled five continents and almost twenty-five countries of the world in various purposes. He travelled to the Himalaya in his childhood with his father. In 1913, he got the Nobel Prize and went to England. Then he frequently travelled to European countries, U.S.A, Japan and China. He went to many places to deliver his lectures and for exhibition of his paintings. In 1930, he delivered his lectures in Oxford (published as the book *Religion of Man*). His solo exhibition of painting was held in France followed by other exhibitions in England, Germany, Switzerland and USA (Banerjee, 2010).

VI. TAGORE'S FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was born on 7 May, 1861 in Kolkata. During that period Tagore's family contributed large sums of money for the introduction of Western education, including colleges for the study of science and medicine. This peculiar situation explains the combination of tradition and experiment that came to characterize Rabindranath Tagore's attitude to life (Jha, 1994).

When Tagore was born, some important changes were taking place in Bengal at that time. It was that period when Bengal was awakening, the Bengal renaissance, when Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was trying to change the then superstitious, dogmatic religious nation. During that time, women education was also neglected. Vidyasagar wanted to reform the position of women in society. So Vidyasagar had established Bengali-medium schools at different places in Bengal with little or limited government support. He also established 'Normal School' (Teacher's Training School).

Tagore had no attraction to the traditional schooling system during his school life. In his childhood, he got himself admitted in several schools. But no formal educational institute could attract him. School was like prison to him. He was also sent to a number of English-speaking schools by his family, but he did not like their teaching style and had no wish to be taught in a foreign language. He gradually withdrew himself from formal schooling. His education was then

carried out with the help of private tutors in various subjects at home. He also had lessons from professionals in wrestling, music and drawing at home.

Tagore's father took him to Santiniketan at the age of 12. It was then a meditation centre. Tagore studied Sanskrit, astronomy and the scriptures that formed the basis of his father's reformed religion. In this period Tagore was free to move from fields to forests. Life in close proximity to nature was unknown to him in the urban surroundings of Kolkata. When his father taught him, he could understand the affection and closeness between the teacher and the student. But this type of relation was absent in the schools of Kolkata, which later influenced Tagore to establish a school at Santiniketan in 1901.

Tagore was sent to London by his father to qualify for the Indian Civil Service or as a lawyer in 1878, when he was only 17. He took his matriculation and then joined University College, London. At this time he studied English literature and became exposed to British social life and Western music, both of which he enjoyed very much. But he returned home suddenly after some eighteen months without completing his education there. However, he was impressed that human nature was perhaps same everywhere. After coming back in India, he continued with his personal education and his creative writing and music (Jha, 1994).

As Tagore was very much fond of the river Padma, he often visited their family's rural states by boat. Here he found his plot of creative writings. Though he was zaminder (Land Lord), but not ruler. He visited villages, talked to people and listened to their problems. As a young landlord managing his family's rural estates, Tagore came to realize the possibilities of introducing education and co-operation to transform rural life. Thus he began to turn his thoughts towards the problems of education of his countrymen. He started his own school in Selaidah, the headquarters of his family estate, to which he sent his own children to be taught by teachers in various subjects, including an Englishman to teach them the English language. He also started organizing co-operatives, schools and hospitals in the villages of his estates and tried to introduce improved farming methods there. All these efforts for rural reconstruction went on while he pursued his creative writing. Tagore called this the period of his Sadhana—preparation, reflection, seriousness and self-education for an active social life. He lived either at Selaidah or on his boat on the river Padma.

In 1901, Tagore left Selaidah, where he had commenced these experiments and moved to Santiniketan. There, with his father's consent, he started a boarding school. The Brahmacharyashram (or Ashram) School was inaugurated on 22 December 1901 with only a few pupils, his son was one of them. It was to be run on the pattern of teachers and pupils living together in natural surroundings. No fees were accepted from students for their education. All expenses were borne by Tagore himself. In the course of time, this Ashram School expanded as the poet's reputation grew.

In 1918, Tagore established Visva-Bharati (University) at Santiniketan. After few years in 1922, he also established the institute of Rural Reconstruction in the same area; which later on called Sriniketan with the participation of L.K. Elmhirst. Mr. Elmhirst wrote:

After graduation and after overcoming some opposition at home I sailed for India and joined Tagore at Santiniketan on the 28th of November 1921. On 5th February 1922, with a small staff and some ten-college students, all of whom said they wanted to be farmers, we set out for the village of Surul and took up residence on the poet's farm. We fixed up our latrines, started gardens, houses and workshops, defeated the marauding monkeys, and settled in. After some months we called ourselves an, 'Institute of Rural Reconstruction,' but we were later named by Tagore, Sriniketan, which is Sanskrit for 'The Abode of Grace' (Elmhirst, 2011).

VII. TAGORE'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Rabindranath Tagore was an outstanding educationist. He did not say only about curriculum or methodology of education but he exposed the need of reformation in education system. He deeply urged the ancient traditional Indian education system. He also mentioned *Tapoban*, where a good relation remained between *Guru and Shishaya*. He felt that *Shadhana* (Meditation/ worship) is very much needed in education as well as any type of achievement. Where the western or other educators advocated education and its curriculum to increase lifestyle, there Tagore urged education for becoming a real, complete and liberal man. He thought that education is for life, not for livelihood. Education is a part of joy. It is not confined within any nation, any country or any ritual bindings. It is for the universe. Tagore's theme of education is based on Upanishad. It was enriched by the philosophy of Gita, which is a different school of Vedanta and the philosophy of medieval saints. Vedanta was his natural inheritance but like his father Maharishi Debendranath Tagore, he did not accept whole interpretation of Gita. "*Brahma satya jagat mithya*" was never acceptable to Tagore (Sen, 2010). The ancient Indian *Tapoban* was the perfect place for learning to him.

Tagore's father established the Meditation and other religious activities centre at Santiniketan where his father on their journey took him to the Himalayas at the age of eleven. Tagore urged to move out of the big city of Kolkata to do something for the children and went to Santiniketan. There he established a school for the children in 1901 called the Brahmacharyashrama (Ashram School) on the model of ancient Indian forest school with approval of his father (Banerjee, 2010). He started his school with only five students, where one of them was his own son. Soon the school started to grow. Students from different states of the country came to join the institution. Parents who could not control their children sent them to Santiniketan. There were may be two factors that impelled Tagore to start a school.

Those are:

1. His son attained the stage when regular education in a formal school became a necessity and his own bitter experience of schooling prompted him to think of a new type of a school for his son.
2. He felt an inner surging urge to occupy himself in some meaningful service to humanity in which his spirituality would find fulfillment. Santiniketan was the place suitable for the purpose. It came into being on December 22nd, 1901 (Herald, 2000).

On the other hand, some feel that Tagore's own tragic experience in schools modeled by the then British rulers of the country could be the reason. Others feel that he thought of starting a school because he had the dream of education. Some other thought he was a visionary in the field of school education, and that he wanted to set up a model. All these explanations might have some elements of truth. But one thing was clear; Tagore wanted his school to be on the model of Tapoban of ancient India. Does that mean that he wanted us to go back to the past? The answer is in the negative. What Tagore wanted to borrow from the Tapoban idea was the following:

- (a) A close proximity to nature, away from the noise and absolute of the urban life;
- (b) A close relationship between *Guru* and the disciple – in almost a family like atmosphere;
- (c) A quest to achieve higher truth – something that was hinted in different *Upanishadic* texts of ancient India (Tagore, 2010).

Tagore's school was residential in character and more or less it was like the model of ancient hermitage schools of the great sages of India. The residence was made of simple leaf-grass cottages and open-air classes under the trees. Education would be free based on the ancient 'Vidya Daan' concept.

His vision was an authentic education, which unfolds the child's potentialities. His services was, for the village people and his life of aesthetic simplicity combined into such a new art of living. The prime moving force of Tagore led him to do so. He prescribed a set of activities so that children could go through consideration the organic wholeness of human individuality, economic self-sufficiency through self-employment and development of human faculties. Some of the prominent activities and conditions are: instruction through mother tongue, scope of free reading other than textbooks not for examination but for pleasure and joy; freedom of work; practice of simplicity, self-help, self-discipline, cooperative living...In a nutshell, the steps towards complete manhood may be described as love and freedom leading to creative work that produces joy. The state of complete joy is the state of complete manhood (Sensharma, 2001).

Tagore considered lack of education to be the main obstacle to the way of India's progress and at the root of all its problems. The prevailing, colonial education system he found unsatisfactory. It appeared to produce clerks for government offices and British businesses in India. The basic objectives of any meaningful national education system, such as promoting creativity, freedom, joy and an awareness of a country's cultural heritage, were completely ignored.

Tagore's different types of Letters, Travel Stories, Short Stories, Novels, Songs and Paintings are ideal to discuss his educational thoughts. His different types of ideas, such as Nationalism, Patriotism, and Universalism have been revealed through those writings. Among them educational thought has been taken place in the center of all.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Tagore's theme of education was 'learning with joy'. Tagore, as a versatile genius, he was a teacher, philanthropist and a

poet but also was a father of new idea in education in the world. 'Joy', 'Tapoban', 'Sadhana', 'Guru and Shishya', 'World education in a single nest' and 'Complete Man' are the most common words in Tagore's idea of education. His aim of education was to create joy in education. Learning should be spontaneous. Obligation to study might be harmful, what happened in Tagore's early life. He bitterly experienced the academic activities in his schooldays, but he became spontaneous when his father acquainted him with the nature. His creativity flourished, when he became free from academic bindings.

Tagore wanted his students to acquire a scientific temper. He desired that teachers should stimulate constructive doubt, the love of mental adventure, the courage and desire to conquer the world by activity and boldness in thought and in action.

Tagore was against any form of physical punishment to impose discipline in schools. He wanted discipline to come from within, from the pursuit of noble and high ambitions in life of a student. Discipline would follow naturally when minor impulses and desires were willingly forgone to pursue grand creative desires.

Rabindranath Tagore, by his efforts and achievements, is part of a global network of pioneering educators, such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori and Dewey and in the contemporary context, Malcolm Knowles, who have tried to create compassionate learning systems appropriate to their respective surroundings.

Tagore, a versatile and a devoted personality, and a compassionate educationist, wanted to change the education system and also wanted to raise his nation high. He traveled many countries and collected huge experience that he tried to implement in his country. His thought was endless to make a complete man through education. Tagore was a great philosopher. His attitude, style of writings, feelings, and love to nature, humanity, nationalism and overall universalism is really an instance for the nation and a matter of pride to Bengali people.

This paper projected on Tagore, the major personality of India and tried to demonstrate his contributions and dedications to the nation. There are many things to learn in his educational ideas and we should try to establish his unfinished dreams in the society, from what of course any nation will be benefited very much.

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