



RABINDRANATH TAGORE ON EDUCATION

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Abstract

The great poet Tagore is well known as Gurudev. From his childhood itself he had manifested all the signs of great personality. While going deeper and deeper into the life and works of Tagore, the fact that comes vividly to the fore is that the educational philosophy of Tagore was mainly the philosophy of his life itself. In his philosophy there is the sum total of the four fundamental philosophies of naturalism, humanism, internationalism and idealism. His philosophy is a depiction of fulfillment through a harmony with all things. Tagore found that the education of his times is inadequate, he wished that education should facilitate an individual's all round development and result in the perfection of the individual and society (www.eajournals.org). In this paper an attempt author discussed the educational ideas of Tagore in a general way.

Keywords: Principles of education, Relevance of Tagore's educational ideas, Key points of Tagore's education

Rabindranath Tagore on Education

Introduction: Rabindranath Tagore was a prominent poet and profound thinker. Asia's first Nobel Laureate, was born into a prominent Calcutta family known for its socio-religious and cultural innovations during the 19th Bengal Renaissance. The profound social and cultural involvement of his family would later play a strong role in the formulation of Rabindranath's educational priorities. His grandfather Dwarkanath was involved in supporting medical facilities, educational institutions and the arts, and he fought for religious and social reform and the establishment of a free press. His father was also a leader in social and religious reform, which encouraged a multi-cultural exchange in the family mansion Jorasanko. The tremendous excitement and cultural richness of his extended family permitted young Rabindranath to absorb and learn subconsciously at his own pace, giving him a dynamic open model of education, which he later tried to recreate in his school at Santiniketan. Not surprisingly, he was not educated in formal school and university, he was a clearly a man of learning. He had his own original ideas about education, which led him to establish an educational institution named Vishva Bharati in Shantiniketan with the intention of re-opening the channel of communication between the East and the West. The only degrees he ever received were honorary ones bestowed late in life.

His experiences at Jorasanko provided him with a lifelong conviction concerning the importance of freedom in education. He also realized in a profound manner the importance of the arts for developing empathy and sensitivity, and the necessity for an intimate relationship with one's cultural and natural environment. In participating in the cosmopolitan activities of the family, he came to reject 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. As he wrote:

I was brought up in an atmosphere of aspiration, aspiration for the expansion of the human spirit. We in our home sought freedom of power in our language, freedom of imagination in our literature, freedom of soul in our religious creeds and that of mind in our social environment. Such an opportunity has given me confidence in the power of education which is one with life and only which can give us real freedom, the highest that is claimed for man, his freedom of moral communion in the human world.... I try to assert in my words and works that education has its only meaning and object in freedom—freedom from ignorance about the laws of the universe, and freedom from passion and prejudice in our communication with the human world. In my institution I have attempted to create an atmosphere of naturalness in our relationship with strangers, and the spirit of hospitality which is the first virtue in men that made civilization possible (Rabindranath Tagore 1929: 73-74).

Educational Philosophy of Tagore: Rabindranath Tagore was more than a resounding leading Indian thinker of India in the twentieth century. A prominent figure through his poetic brilliance, Tagore is known to India and the world as the winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature, the first non-westerner to be honored so. He was famous as an educator. The meaning of the word *educator* is a teacher, a specialist in the theory and practice of

education, an administrator of a school or an educational institution. Tagore was totally fit in all these frames.

Tagore's Principles of Education: The aim of education, as Rabindranath Tagore sees it, is to give one a sense of one's identity as a total man and to bring education in harmony with life. It is self-realization. He believed that this realization was the goal of education. A total man is the one who thinks of himself first and foremost as human being. What matters to him is not his birth and social status. What crucially matters to him, rather, is the conviction that he is above all a man, irrespective of his socio-economic placing, of his caste, creed, and religion.

The prevalent social condition creates a situation in which the rich family grows up with arrogance and the poor with an inferiority complex. This creates a yawning gap between the two. It is, thus, the process of education that is based on self-realization is extremely needed in order to establish a well-balanced relation with others belonging to different social strata. In order to reach this basic identity of human being, one needs to undertake processes towards this stage of a total man, a process that can only be assisted through education.

Tagore did not find any dichotomy between thought, life and philosophy. Besides, he believed that every human being is one who has potentialities to progress towards the super human being, the universal soul. His conception of the universal soul is derived from the Gita and Upanishadic philosophies. Tagore based his ideas on the ancient Indian thought. Indian tradition believes that man's soul and the universal soul are one, and those self-realization amounts to realization of integration with God.

Self-education is based on self-realization, which its process is as important as education itself. The more important thing is that the educator must have faith in himself and universal self, underlying his individual soul. All those actions, which provide a natural sense of contentment, promote educational process. Contentment is a reaction of soul and hence different with merely satisfaction and pleasure. According to Tagore's concept of self-education, the educator has to follow the three following principles:

1. Independence. Tagore believed in a complete freedom of any kind – intellectual freedom, satisfaction, decision, heart, knowledge, actions, and worship. But to achieve this freedom, the student has to practice a calm temperament, harmony, and balance. Through this process the student is able to distinguish between right and wrong, natural and superficial, relevant and irrelevant, permanent and temporal, universal and individual, etc. Consequently, after being able to make this distinction, the student can create a harmony and synthesis in what is right, natural, relevant, permanent, and the real element he has acquired and then turned to self-guidance. This independence is not to be confused with the absence of control, because it is self-control; it implies acting according to one's own rational impulse. Once this level of freedom has been achieved, there is no danger of the individual straying from his path, because his senses, intelligence, emotional feelings and all other powers are directed by his ego.

2. Perfection. Perfection implies that the student must try to develop every aspect of his personality, all the abilities and powers he has been endowed by nature. Therefore, academic learning is not merely to pass examinations, acquiring degrees or certificates with which he fulfils his livelihood. The sole aim of education is development of the child's personality which is possible only when every aspect of the personality is given equal importance, when

no part of the personality is neglected and no part is exclusively stressed.

3. Universality. Universality implies the important aspect of an enduring faith in the universal soul, which exists within him. It is thus important to identify one's own soul with the universal soul. One can search for this universal soul not only within oneself, but in every element of nature and environment. This search is achieved by knowledge, worship and action. Once this realization of the universal soul is achieved, it becomes easier to progress further.

It is, thus, evident from the above principles that the aim of Tagore's pattern of education is independence, perfection, and universality. The educator creates an environment in which the personality of the student undergoes a free, perfect, and unrestricted development.

In summary, the principles of education most suited for our country enunciated by Tagore are as follows:

1. All educational processes should be rooted in our own cultural traditions. As he put it: "Emancipation from the bondage of the soil is not freedom for the tree".
2. The medium of instruction must be through one's own mother tongue. This was stated repeatedly by all Indian leaders, and mentioned by Tagore before the Saddler Educational Commission of 1917. This principle has been repeated several times after Independence, but despite such concurrence of views, our society has failed to achieve this basic measure in education.
3. Tagore was highly appreciative of the Guru-Sishya Ashram type of education. In this he echoes Sri Aurobindo's view that the most important method of education is "soul-to-soul contact" between Guru and Sisya.
4. Linked to the above, Tagore placed great importance on children learning in a natural environment, and said that nature herself was our greatest teacher.
5. The educational process should be one of self-discovery, and free creation.
6. The educational process should incorporate the act of playing, and the joy that playing brings.
7. Education should be linked to working, and learning a craft. This point was repeatedly echoed by Mahatma Gandhi, and he emphasized the importance of crafts, and economic independence, as central to education policy.
8. The school should be integral to Society. This is a view supported by all our thinkers, and even by Lord Curzon, who also placed great importance on rural primary schools located in their environment.
9. Intellectual education should be linked with the arts and crafts which deal with human emotions.
10. Education should also involve spiritual or religious education, which meant for Tagore the comprehension that we are an integral part of cosmic infinity. Gandhiji once said: "True

education should result not in material power, but in spiritual force".

11. Education should lead towards an understanding of the brotherhood of man. It is interesting that the Navodaya Vidyalayas (NPE 1986) also talk of bringing children together from different areas, castes, and cultural backgrounds to strengthen national unity.

12. Tagore saw villages as the real source of our national vitality, just as Mahatma Gandhi did. He also felt the need for Gram Swaraj. Essentially, Gandhiji and Tagore agreed on the following priorities for the nation:

- a) Rejection of the caste hierarchy; b) Hindu Muslim unity;
- c) Constructive work in villages; d) Education through constructive social work, and through working at a trade or craft; e) Revival of village crafts; and f) Self-government at the village level.

13. Neither Gandhi nor Tagore rejected scientific development, or material progress. Both wanted a very much higher standard of living for the masses than existed in their times. They saw clearly that the Western method of education would maintain inequalities, and was incapable of achieving development, or political freedom. Tagore saw that those who had "lost the harvest of their past had also lost their present age". He also said that "political freedom does not give us freedom, when our mind is not free". The key question was how to assimilate Western values, science and knowledge, within an Indian cultural, educational framework that would deliver us from poverty and ignorance.

14. All the great Indian leaders saw the Western form of education as enslaving, and denying us true knowledge. They feared Western aggression, and the way by which the West *excluded the great masses of the people, and swallowed up other cultures and knowledge*. Tagore accused the West of exclusiveness -it fell upon the resources of other people, and it was "cannibalistic" in its tendencies.

Relevance of Tagore's Educational Ideas: Tagore considered lack of education as the main obstacle in the way of India's progress and at the root of all its problems. Looking upon the western approach on education in India, which emphasized and focused merely on sheer placement in British administration offices and businesses in India, Tagore had bitterly criticized the idea. This had become very important in view of the fact that the civil service was saturated and as the students grew, the majority of graduates failed to get any type of white-collar jobs. The time, however, had come against which Tagore urged to attempt a change in the aims of academic learning and thus offered his own remedial idea.

According to him, academic learning becomes joyless and purely mechanical if it is looked upon merely as an instrument for getting jobs and for material and financial gains. In order to ensure the posit of becoming a total man, the aims of education should be not only as a means to a livelihood, but more importantly to promote awareness of human identity, where one comes into well-balanced relations with others. It means that the end of education is to lead us into how to live meaningfully vis-à-vis the people around us.

However, this does not mean that learning has nothing to do with subsistence, rather it should be aimed at something not only collaborated with pragmatic ends. Academic learning should enable us to understand the situations in which we are placed and to adopt proper attitudes

towards them. The attitudes derived from the experiences we have in our lived situations, which involve our relations with the people around us – our relations with families and socio-political surroundings. Because education serves no real purpose in our life if we are unable to connect with the place we are in. As a result, if we are unable to connect with the milieu we are live, thus, it does not stimulate our ideas, nor does it nourish our emotions and imaginations. Tagore criticized the prevalent system of education, which puts too much stress on memory and too little on imagination and thinking.

Tagore highlights the futility of mere scholarship, the idea propounded by some western educational philosophers including Nietzsche. He then criticized any education system whose aim is on the sheer pursuit of knowledge with no end beyond it. Tagore wants to make us aware of the evil of a traditional education system, that is a dry scholarship, which encourages acquisition of static ideas without contributing anything to significant living, an education which remains far away from our life. There must be no gap between ideas or theory and their application to life.

The aim of education should be to develop and nourish our beliefs, emotions, and imaginations, which enable us to assess, evaluate, and take up appropriate attitudes towards our experience in the milieu in which we live. It is this conviction that accounts for Tagore's disapproval of a system of education, which emphasizes too much of theoretical learning. Politics, say, may give us information about the process of democracy, but it cannot become beneficial if it does not bring prosperity to the people.

Tagore viewed the traditional academic learning as merely a knowledge-factory, a mechanical system producing students with machine-ground knowledge for the purpose of being examined and graded. He criticized the idea propounded by Michael Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* in which he looks at educational institutions on the model of prisons of a disciplinary mechanism involving continuous surveillance, examination, training, punishment. Tagore maintained that the aim of education should not be producing like a machine-made product in a factory, because each individual has a distinctive character of his own. Therefore, education system should attend to it carefully; it should enable each individual to blossom in his own way.

The word *education* has a Latin derivation. The meaning of this word is “educare” in Latin Dictionary, which means bringing up children physically and mentally. But normally education is regarded as synonymous with school instruction. But it is not true; it is only part of the education process. The main aim of education is to prepare the student for future life so that he or she acquires the necessary equipment to discharge his or her responsibilities successfully.

Key Points of Tagore's Education

- Tagore was **not in favor of modern education**. He wrote, “A boy in this country has very little time at his disposal. He must learn a foreign language, pass several examinations and qualify himself for a job in the shortest possible time. So, what can he do but cram up a few text books with breathless speed? His parents and his teachers do not let him waste precious time by reading a book of entertainment, and they snatch it away from him the moment they see him with one.” (Rabindranath Tagore in his *Towards Universal Man*, Kabir 1961:34)

- Although Tagore is a very famous person of India, his progressive educational philosophy is largely forgotten today. He wrote about many ideals for education but his ideals have not found their way into India's schools. According to Tagore, if we want to give proper education to the students, we should teach them well right from the beginning when they are very young. But, in India, it is not like that because the teachers who teach the students of primary schools are not well trained for that job. He wrote that they knew neither good English nor good Bengali and the only work they could do was mistreating students.

Tagore played a vital role to tell the society about the principles of teaching and about the role of a teacher in society. Like Tagore, Sidney Hook also wrote about education and its role in the society: "Education is the one that plays a certain integrative role within its culture and in this sense a good education will formally be the same in every culture" (Hook 1946:29).

- Tagore was **against the heavy load of books and bags** students had to carry to the school. Tagore notices that, at the very starting age of the life of a student, his/her parents keep a lot of burden of bags and books on his/her shoulders. He wrote, "From childhood to adolescence and again from adolescence to manhood, we are coolies of the goddess of learning, carrying loads of words on our folded backs" (Kabir 1961:67). According to Tagore, it makes education joyless. He was in favor of easy education, that is, education through music, art, literature and nature, etc. He wrote that the books we read have no vivid pictures of our homes and our society. He also felt that our education is directing us to a land of enchanting falsehood.
- Tagore rightly called **Indian schools as a factory**. He wrote that in the morning the factory opens with the ringing of a bell, and then as the teachers start talking, the machines start working. The teachers stop talking at four in the afternoon when the factory closes and the pupils then go home carrying with them a few pages of machine-made learning.
- According to Tagore, if a person wants to be a good teacher s/he should follow some points like removing the fear of teacher from the minds of students; changing the view of teachers relating to the purpose and method of education; using narrative imagination; focusing on the education of rural children; promoting the freedom of the child; and last but not least, kindling an awakening in the minds of the students.
- It is true that the majority of Indian teachers today believe that fear is a necessary condition for learning. But **Tagore's views were totally different. He thought that as a teacher we should provide such an environment, that students have confidence to express their own learning ability.** Tagore was opposed to any form of corporal punishment to discipline students because he thought that fear of making mistakes prevents an individual from being free to venture a new thought, to innovate, to ask questions, to be creative, etc. Discipline should be based on motivations like joy and pursuit of creative tasks. But even in recent times, and even in Kolkata, teachers are caught punishing the students violently. Many students died as a result of being beaten by their teachers in India. Tagore did not follow these things in his own school.
- Tagore's views of education are not available in any single volume. It is traceable in his various expressions. His ideas were derived mainly from his own experience. According to him our modern education system is not so good because it does not allow us to cultivate the power of thought and the power of imagination. **Tagore wrote, "To read without thinking is like accumulating building materials without building anything. We instantly climb to the top of our pile and beat it down**

incessantly for two years. Until it becomes level and somewhat becomes level and somewhat resembles the flat roof of a house”.

- According to Tagore, **lack of education is main obstacle in the way of India’s progress** and at the root of all its problems. It is true that in our country the basic objectives of education system, such as promoting creativity, freedom, joy and an awareness of a cultural heritage were completely ignored. At the time of Tagore, Indians have been divided into two parts due to the medium of education that was English. One who received this education and second those who did not. He worked hard for the improvement of education system in India. From children’s education and rural development, he increasingly shifted his attention to university education and developing the surrounding villages as one of the university’s functions. He wanted to devise an alternative form of education. He wanted to reveal the unnaturalness of the system of education in our country, its lack of links with the nation and its management which was in the hands of a foreign government. The working of the government, its courts of law and its education system were conducted in a language completely unintelligible to the majority of Indians. The main cause behind the awareness of the people was lack of the use of mother-tongue.
- Main aim of Tagore was **to provide study with joy**. According to him picnics , excursions, games, music, metrical performances and celebrating socio-religious festivals constituted regular features of the calendar. New Year’s Day, the Rainy Season festival, the New Rice festival, and the Spring festival were - and still are – all regular features.
- Tagore was in **favor of good education**, in which a teacher can prepare the student for good future and character as well. So he introduced work education as –“a joyous exercise of our inventive and constructive energies that help to build up character”. It is right to say that in our childhood we learn everything with the aid of our body and mind, with all the senses active and eager. When we are sent to school, the doors of natural information are closed to us; our eyes see the letters, our ears hear the lessons, but our mind misses the perpetual stream of ideas from nature, because the teachers, in their wisdom, think these bring distraction and have no purpose behind them. But Tagore was in favor of teaching the things from nature a lot.
Tagore’s love for nature reveals why he was in favor of education through natural elements in his school Santiniketan. It is apt to say about Tagore: As one of the earliest educators to think in terms of the global village, Rabindranath Tagore’s educational model has a unique sensitivity and aptness for education within multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural situations, amidst conditions of acknowledged economic discrepancy and political imbalance (O’Connell 2003).
- The achievements of Rabindranath Tagore in all these fields are so great that they mark him out as one of the greatest sons of India and, indeed, one who has a **message for entire humankind**. Everyone in India recognizes him as the winner of Nobel Prize in literature, the philosopher who stood with Gandhi and other great persons of his day. Some Indians are admirers of his poetry and other works. But, throughout India, every student recognizes him as the author of India’s National Anthem, *Jana Gana Mana*.
- *In Tagore’s view, the higher aim of education was the same as that of a person’s life, that is, to achieve fulfillment and completeness. There was a lesser aim that of providing the individual with a satisfactory means of livelihood, without which a person would not be able to satisfy his/her basic requirements and thus fail to achieve*

either of these two aims. Tagore also thought that the limitless development of man is possible only in an environment free from any kind of bondage.

His commentary on modern education was harsh but bitterly true. He eloquently stated that, "We rob the child of this earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him grammar. His hunger is for Epic, but he is supplied with chronicles of facts and dates." Tagore considered education to be the means to self-reliance. He felt that true education harmonizes an existence with nature and its real goal should be to commune personally with the universe.

In the end, it should be noted that Rabindranath in his own person was a living icon of the type of mutuality and creative exchange that he advocated. His vision of culture was not a static one, but one that advocated new cultural fusions, and he fought for a world where multiple voices were encouraged to interact with one another and to reconcile differences within an overriding commitment to peace and mutual interconnectedness. His generous personality and his striving to break down barriers of all sorts gives us a model for the way multiculturalism can exist within a single human personality, and the type of individual which the educational process should be aspiring towards.

Tagore's educational efforts were ground-breaking in many areas. He was one of the first in India to argue for a humane educational system that was in touch with the environment and aimed at overall development of the personality. Santiniketan became a model for vernacular instruction and the development of Bengali textbooks; as well, it offered one of the earliest coeducational programs in South Asia. The establishment of Visva-Bharati and Sriniketan led to pioneering efforts in many directions, including models for distinctively Indian higher education and mass education, as well as pan-Asian and global cultural exchange.

One characteristic that sets Rabindranath's educational theory apart is his approach to education as a poet. At Santiniketan, he stated, his goal was to create a poem 'in a medium other than words.' It was this poetic vision that enabled him to fashion a scheme of education which was all inclusive, and to devise a unique program for education in nature and creative self-expression in a learning climate congenial to global cultural exchange.

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