

# Asian Resonance

## Visva-Bharati: A Confluence of Idealistic Philosophy and Progressive Energy

### Abstract

While dealing with Rabindranath's interesting interchanges with Europe during my research for PhD. I found an amazing journey of Rabindranath both in philosophical and in practical domain as he was dreaming and materializing Visva-Bharati. I would like to analyse his education theories in the context of his educational experimentations at Santiniketan along with his interactions with Europe. His idea of Free Education, Education from Nature, Constructing the Self and even Internationalism and Cosmopolitanism have been blended in various ways to give birth to Visva-Bharati. I would like to bring out this process and analyse it in my own way in this paper.

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, Visva-Bharati, Seventh World Congress on New Schooling, International League of New Education.

### Introduction

A conflict between romantic life of imagination and the life of action and sacrifice, unhappy experience of school, the rigid routine of home education programme, the journey to the Himalayas with his saint-like father at the age of eleven, the enlightened family environment, the acquaintance with Sanskrit literature and "Upanishads closed, the acquaintance with late 19<sup>th</sup> century European education system at the age of 17, the Sudder Street experience of 'the vision' at the age of 20, the socio political conditions in India then and the Silaidaha experience initially compelled Rabindranath to think of an education system, suitable for multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural situations amidst conditions of acknowledged economic discrepancy and political imbalance. But while replying to the repeatedly asked question about the reason behind establishing Brahmacharyasrama on 22 December 1901, Rabindranath comments:

"I suppose this poet's answer would be that, when he brought together a few boys, one sunny day in winter, among the warm shadows of the tall straight sal trees with their branches of quiet dignity, he started to write a poem in a medium not of words."<sup>1</sup>

This restlessness of his creative mind has always been there behind his educational experiments. There are distinct phases of Rabindranath's evolution, namely turning back to past, nationalism, internationalism, cosmicism and loka-siksha (mass-education). "*The Gitanjali : Song Offerings*" should be placed at right place brings together the ideals Rabindranath wants to keep before the nation, before mankind and before educational institutions. Although at different periods, in different contexts, Rabindranath emphasized different ideas as being of fundamental importance, there is one strain of thought which we may observe running through all his educational utterances and activities either in bold, clear outline or in subtler concealed forms. It is the ideal of the development of all the innate faculties of an individual leading to an all-round, harmonious development of his personality as well as of complete manhood.

### The Problem

Rabindranath's originality in the field of education lies not in his aims but in the selection of activities, which he prescribes so that children going through consideration of 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, austerity but not poverty, self help, self discipline, cooperative living, respect for guests, elders and women, a



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close contact with nature, teachers and society, learning Bengali, English, social studies, mathematics, science, gardening, craft, music, 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 unadulterated joy is the state of complete manhood.<sup>2</sup>

Education, for Rabindranath is the instrument fashioned by men to achieve life's goals, along with economic benefits. Rabindranath observes that he who sees all beings, nothing remains unrevealed to him, and that should be the motto of Indian educational institutions. Rabindranath writes 'Siksharherpher' (Differences in education) in 1892 which is his first major writing on educational problems and delivers the convocation address to 'Gurukul Kangri' in 1941, his last public utterance on education. By then he does not remain the same person if we take into account the change that has come over him. The principle adopted by Rabindranath is that a man being a consumer must also be a producer. It looks as if he is anticipating Gandhiji's Basic Education Scheme.

The tragedy of western education is succinctly put by Rabindranath in quite an interesting way. In his opinion, a child is taught Geography in a way that he loses his earth just as learning grammar causes him a severe loss of his language. The child hungers for music and dance, but we thrust a load of facts into his reluctant brain. Students are not passive receivers of knowledge but discoverers of facts and principles.<sup>3</sup>

## Review of Literature

Rabindranath knew Rousseau's educational ideas perfectly well, as well as Pestalozzi's and Froebel's educational thoughts and experiences. He had full knowledge of American educator John Dewey, a prominent figure in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the founder of the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago. He had prominent impact on the progressive New School Movement.

The principles of psychology, sociology, ethics and education of British Sociologist, philosopher, psychologist and educator Herbert Spencer were Rabindranath's favourites. Spencer's book, *Education: Intellectual, moral and physical*, published in the same year of Rabindranath's birth, 1861 was there in Rabindranath's personal library. Rabindranath met Francisco Giner de los Rios, the Spanish educator and founder of the Spanish New School Institution for free education 'Institucion Libre de Ensenanza.' Rabindranath, however was quite aware of the difficulties

The European New Schools were going thorough, especially those of the English, French, Italian, German and Russian movements. He was familiar with Confucius, Goethe, Emerson and Noelle Davis's remarkable book *Education for Life* and the New School progressive pedagogy, a movement that many attribute to Scottish educator Cecil Reddie when he founded Abbotsholme in a rural property in

dance, drama, participation in games, daily prayer, campus cleaning and participation of elected students in self-government.

1899. Some researchers including Jose Paz Rodriguez believe that the first new school was founded in Madrid and later spread to other parts of Spain by Giner de los Rios in 1876: 'Institucion Libre de Ensenanza'.

## Concepts

Understanding of Rabindranath's concept of Free, Open and Proper Education, working behind Visva-Bharati depends on the Education-Theories of several eminent personalities both of the East and of the West. The Spanish educator Lorenzo Luzuriaga, founder and editor of the *Revista de Pedagogia* (Journal of Pedagogy), semi official organization of the Spanish progressive pedagogic movement, points out in 1926 that:

"The Institution for free education is the first 'New School' in Europe. Thirteen years before Reddie's school in Abbotsholme, twenty-two years before Lietz founded his land erziehungsheime in Germany, and twenty-three years before Demolins opened The Ecole des Roches. Giner – the greatest modern Spanish educator – founded The Institution Libre de Ensenanza in Spain in 1876."<sup>4</sup>

With the impetus of forerunners such as Pestalozzi's school in Yverdan, Froebel's kindergarten and Leo Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana, eventually the pedagogic New School Movement spread all over the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Decroly, Kerschensteiner, Montessori, Claparede, Freinet, Cousinet, Wyneken, Geheeb et.al. in Europe, Dewey, Parkhurst, Killpatrick, Washburne et. al. in America, Colombian Agustin Nieto Caballero, who interviewed Rabindranath in 1924, founded the 'Gimnasio Moderno' in Bogota in 1914, the first 'New School' in Latin America.

Swiss educator Adolphe Ferriere travelled to several countries in Europe and America to spread pedagogic ideals of the New School Movement. After being awarded the Noble Prize Rabindranath and his school in Santiniketan became quite well known in Europe and Italian educator Giacomo Ottonello considered it to be the first real 'New School' in the world. After that whenever Rabindranath travelled to Europe, he stayed in contact with the founding educators of the New School Movement and sometimes he participated in conferences, symposia, encounters and meetings. He visited Paul Geheeb, and his Odenwaldschule in 1921 and during the same visit to Europe he went to Devon to visit L. K. Elmhurst who later on worked as his secretary and collaborator and also helped him in managerial activities in Santiniketan.

Elmhurst took him to Dartington Hall, a farm school still in operation. During this visit to Europe he also had a plan to travel to Spain especially to visit the 'Institucion Libre de Ensenanza'. This tour-plan was made by Juan Ramon Jimenez and Rabindranath was really sorry as he failed to access

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it. During this visit to Europe Rabindranath stayed in Geneva from 1 May 1921 to 6 May 1921 and within this brief period he visited The Institute of Jean Jacques Rousseau, where he met Swiss educators Claparde and Pierre Bovet and gave an interesting talk, 'My pedagogy,' published in the journal *L' Educateur* on 11 June 1921.<sup>5</sup>

## Research Design

My research is fundamentally based on a two-way journey of Rabindranath, one towards the West, rather 'The Other' and the other towards the East, rather the 'Self'. In several issues of the *Revista de Pedagogia*, edited by Lorenzo Luzuriaga we find reference of Rabindranath's presence in several meetings and conferences of the 'International League of the New Education'.

He is included among the speakers of The International Conference of The League in Elsinor (Denmark) on 21 August 1929. The topic of the conference was 'New psychology and School Programmes.' Together with Rabindranath, Cousinet, Decroly, Ferriere, Luzuriaga, Piaget, Parkhurst and Paulsen were other speakers in that conference. Issue No. 85, year VIII of the journal of the League, published in January 1929 bears every detail of the conference and Rabindranath's participation in it, whereas Issue No. 173, year XV, of that journal, published in 1936 mentions Rabindranath as one of the vice-presidents of the seventh World Congress on New Schooling, organized by the League from 31 July 1936 to 14 August 1936 in Cheltenham (England)

The topic of the Congress was 'Education and freedom' and it was presided by Percy Nunn, a professor of London University and the other vice presidents, along with Rabindranath were Dewey, Bovet and Langevin. The speakers were Lynch, Ferriere, Geheeb, Washburne, Sadler, Piaget, Parkhurst and Pieron. In the same issue of the journal it is reported that Rabindranath is to participate in The Congress of The League in Locarno (Switzerland) on 15 August 1937.<sup>6</sup>

This relationship between Rabindranath and The International League of New Education is not only limited within such participations in Conferences and Congresses, it is extended to such a level that an almost total coincidence in the educational principles and practical development can be traced between Santiniketan and the 'League'. They share views on child psychology, on the importance given to nature and the fine arts, on the teaching methods used, and on the educational goals. The most prominent educators of The League, Francisco Giner de los Rios and Manuel Bartolome Cossio share several thoughts of Rabindranath on education, especially the idea of education in the proximity of nature with a serious emphasis on fine arts.

The journal of the League published the Spanish translation of an essay by W. W. Pearson, a very important collaborator of Rabindranath, 'Morada de la Paz, Shantiniketan. La escuela de Rabindranath Tagore en Bolpur' (Abode of peace, Shantiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore's School in Bolpur) in Issue No.

733, published on 30 April 1921 and the Spanish translation of Rabindranath's 'The Schoolmaster' ('El maestro de escuela') was published in Issue No. 788 of the journal, published on 31 January 1925. Rabindranath's idea of education was a topic for repeated discussion in this journal between 1913 and 1944. In this context I would like to trace the track of the development of Rabindranath's idea of education.

It was from his own experience of the farmer's attitudes and their social behavior that Rabindranath realized that strength can be generated only in a self-reliant village society developing its own locus of power and its own momentum of growth through education. He turned again and again in various contexts to this theme of self-reliance, local initiatives, local leadership and local self-government centering on cooperative ways of life. This could be the basis for recognizing India's fragmented rural society, and could serve as an instrument of welfare.<sup>7</sup>

## Findings

My findings, as the products of the aforementioned research do evidently tally with Rabindranath's realization that education and village councils or panchayets were the only available instruments of economic and social change, and that the villagers should obtain various forms of expert help from outside to accomplish this change. As he says that poverty springs from disunity and wealth from co-operation. As a young landlord managing his family's rural estates, Rabindranath came to realize the possibilities of introducing education and cooperation to transform rural life. Thus he began to turn his thoughts towards the problems of education. He spoke publicly on 'The Vicissitudes of Education' in which he made a story plea for the use of the mother-tongue. His first experiments in teaching also date from this period. He started his own school in Silaidaha, to which he sent his own children to be taught by teachers in various subjects, including an Englishman to teach them the English language.

Rabindranath in 'Shikshar Swangeekaran' [Make education your own] (1936) returned to his recurrent theme of the unnaturalness of the system of education in India, 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.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

While concluding this paper I would like to mention that Rabindranath contrasted the situation in India with what he had seen in the USSR and in Japan, where the government had been able to educate their people within a very short time. Educating India's entire population and restoring the flow of culture from the educated class to the rural population would not come about unless the mother-tongue was adopted as the medium of teaching. Rabindranath was against any conspicuous emphasis on materials, buildings, furniture or books that imitated Western educational institutions in India.

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He thought that this would make education too expensive for the common people. He was against bookish learning. In his opinion books come between life and mind. They deprive us of our natural faculty of getting knowledge directly from nature and life and have generated within us the habit of knowing everything through books. We touch the world not with our minds, but with our books. They do dehumanize us and make us unsocial. Independent efforts of students to gather knowledge from direct sources is very important in Rabindranath's opinion, for proper education.<sup>9</sup>

The primary objective of Rabindranath was not only to establish an Eastern as well as Global cultural centre but was also to study consciousness of mind of man in diverse phases of truth. He wanted the students to have intimate relation with one another through patient study and research on the different cultures of the East merging into oneness. The approach to the west is desired to be from the stance of such a unity of the life and thought of Asia. The realization of the common fellowship to study the meeting of the East and the West is expected to reinforce the essential conditions of world peace through the free communication of ideas between the two hemispheres. Rabindranath's aim was to have good fellowship and collaboration between the intellectuals and scholars of both Eastern and Western countries, free from all antagonisms of race, nationality, creed or caste and in the name of the One Supreme Being, who is 'Shantam', 'Shivam', 'Advaitam'.

Rabindranath's educational theory is his approach to education as a poet where financial gains were insignificant. At Santiniketan he affirmed his aspiration and built a poem of peace and harmony via communion of nature and education. His sensitive vision leads him to style a system of edification, which was all comprehensive. His broad and divine thoughts formulated a unique programme for education in nature and creative self-expression in a learning climate congenial to global peace. His views were linked with the development of his own mind and spirit and his profound understanding of India's traditional educational experience and philosophy.

His activity- oriented school for village children appears to have inspired Gandhiji's idea of 'Basic Education'. In Rabindranath'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 one would not be able to satisfy one's basic requirements and thus fail to achieve either to these two aims. Rabindranath also imagined that the limitless development of man is possible only in an environment, free from any kind of bondage. His idea of education was not only linked with intellectual development, but was also with the development of a student's aesthetic nature and creativity.

The quest for knowledge and physical activity in an agreeable environment were integral

parts of the process. Freedom and creativity are linked in Rabindranath's thought, one conditioning the other. The more people go beyond the limitations of their animal nature, the closer they come to humanism; freedom and unity are then able to develop their creativity. This quest alone gives a meaning to life and education is an effort to make life meaningful. Here the aims of the individual and those of the community have become almost one. Rabindranath did not neglect the lesser aims of life and education.

In the colonial system of education that existed at that time the whole focus of education was an employment to the complete neglect of the higher aims of life. His intention was to correct this wrong emphasis without ignoring science, technology and agricultural sciences, as well as training in village craft. Without these it was not possible to revive the derelict life of rural India. Both categories of aims should thus be considered the objective of education.<sup>10</sup>

## Suggestions

While projecting the final suggestions based on my findings in this paper, I would like to mention that it was necessary, Rabindranath felt, to make the younger generation aware of their national cultural heritage and to grasp its significance for them. At the same time education should bring children face to face with the cultures of other countries and persuade them to learn from them. Rabindranath put great emphasis on the use of a national language as the vehicle of education at all stages of education. He wanted Indian universities to integrate themselves with society and make an effort to educate people living in the countryside. He did not want education to remain confined to the cities and to particular classes of society. He had a deep-rooted concern for women's' education.

His educational institutions have almost always been co- educational and the number of female students is conspicuously large at Visva-Bharati. He wanted women and men to be offered similar theoretical courses with separate practical courses for women, since their roles in life differed from those of men. The optimum emphasis Rabindranath puts on teachers as in his opinion, teachers should help young children grow on their own as a gardener helps the young plants to grow. Universal schooling, of decent quality, in his opinion, could be the single biggest move it makes towards future posterity.

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