

Education in Light of Internationalism : View of Rabindranath Tagore

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ABSTRACT

Tagore, the World-renowned poet was also an eminent educator of his time. The final outcome of his educational endeavors was the Visva-Bharati, which was conceptualized as a reaction to colonialism and also to chauvinistic nationalism. In the colonial period, the then education system had become a tool to serve the government machinery. The nationalists were clamoring for a suitable education system which would serve the national interests. The poet, who could not bypass the hegemonising nationalistic ideas of his time, however, could transcend it and finally could move towards internationalism, which was the basic impetus of his educational endeavors. The effort here is to locate the connections in between Tagore's concept of internationalism and education, to find out the threads in between the stages of evolution of his concept of internationalism, and phases of his educational ideas and concepts.

Key words: Rabindranath Tagore, Education, Gurukul, Visva-Bharati

Biswakavi (World Poet), as the world knows Rabindranath Tagore, was the versatile intellectual of the 19th Century. However the world famous poet was also a great educator, philosopher and a nationalist intellectual, who could think beyond chauvinistic nationalism; when nationalism was the hegemonic issue of his days. He was born and grew up in the colonial period. It is well known fact that he did not continue with the then formal education. The ways of his early schooling was to leave a deep impression on him¹. Later his idea about internationalism was merged with his ideas of education, which was perceived as the process to make our life in harmony with all existence rather to give us merely information. He formulated the ultimate aim of education as the all-round development of an individual for harmonious adjustment to reality. Let us first take a brief survey of the outcome of the then system of education in the colonial period.

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I

In 1835, British policy makers had taken decision to introduce English Education in India. This educational system in India had two important results. (1) It accelerated the spread of western ideas and western outlook on life among Indians. (2) By providing a common language and a common cultural background, it offered ample opportunities for Indians to establish national solidarity. (A.K Majumder, 1967)

However British Policy Makers expected that the English education in India would produce a group of de-nationalized Indians who would fit only to be serving in the subordinate ranks of administration². Indian Nationalist Educationalist like Tagore, Vivekananda strongly criticized this education system by comparing this with “*Giant machine for producing clerks*”. In his essay “*Shikshar Samasya*” (Problem of Education) Tagore bring forward some serious problems of English Education in India. (1) Teacher –Pupil relationship was very much mechanical in this system. The Educational System was itself like a giant Machine and teacher was the part of the machine. So, the teacher pupil relationship was also mechanical, not humanitarian. (2) Another important drawback which Tagore mentioned was the arrangement of Education was high, but the relation between arrangement and the human factors was low. It could not benefit or be helpful for the students. (3) Third important drawback of English education system was to give emphasis on moral advice to the students. (4) The school was detached from nature. The school was situated in a very artificial environment, made of rod and bricks. This artificial environment is a principle obstacle of proper development of students.

During the first fifty years of English education, a large section of Indians followed western idea blindly and imitated western mode of life somewhat thoughtlessly. This section of educated Indians lost all touch with the rich human soil and was quite oblivious of their surroundings. The community was removed far away from the educated class. The common people could neither accept the new learning nor go back to the past, because traditional system of education was fast disappearing. (Majumder, 1967)

Indian nationalist educationist like Tagore, Vivekananda, Aurobindo made untiring efforts to revive the ancient culture of India in the light of science and technology. Tagore vehemently supported vernacular medium for instructions and spoke on ‘The Vicissitudes of Education’³ Tagore set out to revive the Ashrama Education or Gurukul system in opposition to English Educational system.

II

The Indian history of late nineteenth Century can be considered as the history of Indian Nationalism. Tagore was not free from this nationalistic Idea. Gandhi called him “*an ardent Nationalist*”. In his obituary of Tagore, Gandhi said, “*In death of Rabindranath Tagore , we have not only lost the greatest poet of the age, but an ardent nationalist who was also a humanitarian*”. Another important concept which creates the idea of ‘Brahmacharyashram’ in to poet’s mind is ‘Revivalism’.

However Tagore did not confine his Idea into the concept of ‘Narrow Nationalism’. At the end of Swadeshi Movement and the pre-world war period, the frothiness of Chauvinism was

hammering the poets mind and gradually he detoured his idea from nationalism to a International one.

In 1918 he turned the idea of Shantiniketan into VisvaBharati. But the idea of VisvaBharati did not come accidentally into the poets mind. On the eve of his first journey to America in 1912-13, Tagore wrote in a letter:

“If only a handful of competent men start by engaging themselves in research in their respective laboratories, things will take shape automatically and a true University emerge...”

This is the earliest hint in Tagore writings of a University being established at Shantiniketan. During his second visit to America in 1960 the Poet wrote:

“The school at Shantiniketan must be developed into a link between the world and the India...” He declared, *“That small region must be turned into a spot of above all national and geographical marks.”*

III

Tagore’s concept of internationalism was reflected in his educational ideas. In one way or the other, his educational ideas and policies were reactive to the then system of education, which was a colonial one.

However the central difficulty in writing about his educational ideas is that he has not left behind a comprehensive educational treatise. His ideas are needed to be gleaned through an analysis of his writings and lectures over a number of years⁴. On the other hand Tagore’s concept of internationalism has been discussed as evolutionary, as having certain shifts or stages. However scholars⁵ have shown that there are difficulties in dividing his writings in stages. To Sehanabis, the difficulties are; first, Tagore reacted more as a creative person than as a political analyst; secondly there are overlapping ideas and images recurrent in these categories. He reacted to issues like colonialism and imperialism through his educational ideas and institutes. But establishing direct cause and effect relationship in between his concepts of internationalism and education is a tough one, in many cases direct threads are not easily visible.

Still some threads are visible. Scholars⁶ point the period between 1878 and the close of the nineteenth century as the first stage of evolution of his internationalism. In this stage, we find the awareness of the young poet about, a) the ghastly nature of the foreign domination; b) the connection between racial discrimination and material interest under imperialism; c) conflicts between the ideals of the western democracy and that of imperialism and d) also an awareness centred around the Orient could be found in the last years of the nineteenth century. These ideas were reflected in his writings.

There has been a tendency to group his writings into three broad divisions⁷. In the first phase, which is assumed to be 1892-1901, Tagore’s writings vehemently proclaimed the lack of education to be the main obstacle in the way of India’s progress. The then education system was not at all satisfactory to him. As we have noted earlier, the system was formed to meet the need of the colonial government, to produce clerks to man the government offices and British businesses

in India. To Tagore, this system ignored the basic objectives of any worthwhile national education system; the objectives of a national education system should be promotion of creativity, freedom, joy and an awareness of a country's cultural heritage.

The then education system was not even up to date, as it ignored the developments in the fields of education outside India. Moreover the absence of vernacular languages as the medium of instruction divided the nation into two groups- English educated Indians and the rest.

The years between 1901 and 1912-13 have been described as the second phase of evolution of his concept of Internationalism. Here we notice an anti-western feeling that continued upto the early months of the Swadeshi Movement. However, in this period he came to realize the hollowness of the nationalistic chauvinism and sought to review the East-West relationship from the point of view of the Mahabharata i.e. from India as the mother or melting pot of many civilizations.

Such ideas were reflected in his endeavors to reform the education system in India. In the second phase(1901-1918) Tagore tried to develop a national education system. His ideas are well reflected in his writings. As he shifted away from the chauvinistic nationalism his ideas of Santiniketan gradually crystallized. The ashrama school at Santiniketan was founded in 1901 on the basis of the ancient Indian forest schools. In Tapovan[The Forest School of India](1909) Tagore argued that the forest school was typical of the Indian system of education with its emphasis on three basic elements of Indian culture, namely Advaita(non-duality)in the field of knowledge, universal friendship in the field of feeling, and fulfillment of one's duties without expectations or concern for the outcome. Thus the forest school infused *sadhana*(disciplining one's senses and life) with education. Tagore did not stop there, he included science and similar modern subjects in his curriculum.

Similarly another significant writing of this period Shikshar Vahana[The Vehicle of Education](1915) emphasized the importance of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. He categorically stated that if the rural masses were to be benefitted, the vernacular languages should be the medium of instruction at all levels of education, including higher education. The ideal school, to him, should be situated under the open sky, surrounded by fields, trees and plants. This would lead to austere pursuits and renunciation. Thus it would represent the vast background of the nature, against which everything should be perceived and envisaged.

Tagore stressed that significance of educating senses and feelings are distinct from educating intellect. In this context, the word 'forest' has different connotation, he explained, it is not only dense jungle, but tapovana, the forest clearing⁸.

The national system of education in India should be based on the honest truths which characterized the civilization. And the soul truth is not commercialism, imperialism or nationalism, but universalism. So the aim of the national education system, thus, transgress the chauvinistic nationalism, to incorporate universalism; reflecting his ideas of internationalism, the aim, therefore, should be all round development of the individual personality in tune with the environment. So Gurudev said, "Nature and human spirit, wedded together, would constitute our temple and selfless good deeds our worship"(Dharma Shiksha, 1912).

The years between the beginning of the First World War and 1930, has been regarded as the third stage of the evolution of his concept of Internationalism. Later on in continuation of this stage, a final stage is also discernible, a frustration was gripping him on the failure of the western capitalist civilization and the rise of Fascism. Still an un-diminishable optimism based on his belief on humanity led him to find alternatives. In general, the poet shows a deep and anxious concern for the War. He had found that the root of war lay in the history of capitalist civilization.

So we find a scathing criticism of nationalistic chauvinism of the imperial powers. We can give many examples of the poet's keen and critical observation of the World situations. This kind of reactions expressed strong condemnation for the powerful oppressor (whoever that power might be) and a deep sympathy for the oppressed. We get much of such writings on the background of the Second World War. On 20th September, 1939, in a letter to his secretary and poet Amiya Chakrabarty, Tagore wrote;

*"In a sad mind I observed from distance that the leaders of the Great Empire [i.e. Great Britain] saw with an inactive indifference the way Japan consumed China in installments. ... That proud empire with a cool face let Italy swallow Abyssinia. In the name of alliance it let German crush Czechoslovakia under its boots. I also observe that the Spanish republic was robbed off owing to the 'non-interventionist' policy [of Britain] and that its [i.e. Britain] boundless satisfaction over securing Germany's signature in the futile Munich Pact, at the cost of bowing to Hitler..... But what pains me the most is [the situation in] China because the imperialist force [i.e. Japan] has immense money and strength but the helpless China is fighting with almost empty hands, based on fearless heroism"*⁹.

Simultaneously an awareness of the economic basis of nationalism were also found during this phase.

He searched for an alternative to the conflicting world in his own terms without any influence of nation states and political parties. On 11th October, 1916, in a letter to son Rathindranath, Tagore wrote about his dream of making his school at Santiniketan a thread of relationship between India and the World.

After a scathing attack on chauvinistic nationalism, it was a positive search for new refuge in internationalism¹⁰. Far away from an institutional internationalism, which considered the nation state as the necessary, cognitive and logical step towards internationalism, his concept of internationalism had rather bypassed the question of the nation state. It is not to suggest that, he, from this period undermined the importance of national independence. But, unlike Gandhi, he did not prioritize his preferences.

So, Visva Bharati, as he conceived a World University, was founded at the end of the First World War. As the name itself suggest, it was conceived to championize universal friendship, which was believed to be the characteristic feature of the Indian civilization¹¹. His journeys after 1913 made him more and more aware about the other countries. As a result, the need for cooperation in educational system, among other things, was felt. Besides education for the children and rural development, he concentrated on university education. Scholars from abroad were welcomed to guide the students¹². In this phase development of the surrounding villages of Visva

Bharati was a chief concern of the university. He wrote,

In every nation education is intimately associated with the life of the people. For us, modern education is relevant only to turning out clerks, lawyers, doctors, magistrates and policemen...This education has not reached the farmer, the oil grinder, nor the potter. No other educated society has been struck with such disaster....If ever a truly Indian university is established it must from the beginning implement India's own knowledge of economics, agriculture, health, medicine and of all other everyday science from the surrounding villages. Then alone the school or university become the centre of the country's way of living. This school must practice agriculture, dairying and weaving using the best modern methods....I have proposed to call this school Visva Bharati¹³.

In 1919 in Ashantosh Karon (Cause of Dissatisfaction), he expressed his deep anguish at the attempts of establishing new universities following the old patterns. Because no new forms were adopted to meet the need of the day. During that time the civil services was saturated and the majority of the graduates failed to get any job. The then system had made them unfit for anything else than clerical jobs. So the aims of the university education must be changed. The primary aim of a national education system was not only to provide a means of livelihood to their citizens, to Tagore the more important aim is self-improvement. Education should cater to the needs of a particular nation, so each national system should be different. That is why borrowing knowledge and experiences from abroad is important, but these should not displace the foundations of the Indian system of education. So in his *Shikhhkar Suwangeekaran* [Make Education Your Own], he returned to his recurrent theme of the unnaturalness of the system of education in India, that it did not have link with the nation and it was managed by the foreign government. As this system cared least for the vernacular languages, the working of the government, its courts of law etc. remained unintelligible for the majority of the Indians. In the essays written in between 1919 to 1936, he tried to show what should be done to reform the education system. In his words;

We must try to understand how Indian genius expressed itself[...] Unless we try to put these things together and discover the integrating factors behind these diverse streams of thought and make them a subject of study at our universities, we would only be borrowing knowledge from abroad. The natural habitat for knowledge is where it is produced. The main task of universities is to produce knowledge, its dissemination is its secondary function. We must invite those intellectuals and scholars to our universities who are engaged in research, invention or creative activity¹⁴.

Perhaps this can be called an alternative internationalism of Tagore¹⁵, this internationalism bore a sense of pride in India's ancient splendor and therefore the educational institute should not lose its roots in the ancient Indian system. Tagore is regarded as one of the best representatives of the 'Bengal renaissance', which drew inspiration from western knowledge and culture. Like other contemporary intellectuals, Tagore initially thought of the Western civilization as the champion of humanity. Still, following said, commentators would argue that Tagore's notion of modernity cannot be fully equated with the western modernity. He was a colonial subject and therefore the basic teachings and values of the Enlightenment were received and developed to establish an autonomous space of the Oriental/Indian modernity. This modernity both accepted and rejected

many principles of both western modernity and Indian ‘traditions’ and juxtaposed them as the special form of modernity. This modernity, which although privileged western knowledge, also bore a pride in Indian cultural splendor, is partially a construction of the Western Orientalists, Partha Chatterjee calls it ‘our modernity’ i.e. a modernity with a difference¹⁶. Perhaps the much quoted poem of the poet summarizes his ideas of education and internationalism; -

*Where the mind is without fear, and the heart is held high,
Where the world is not broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls,
Where the words came out from the depths of truth,
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its
way into the dreary desert sand of dead habits, Where the mind is led forward
by thee into ever widening thought and action - Into that heaven of freedom,
My father, let my country awake.¹⁷*

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Notes

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