

Tagore's Santiniketan School A Retrospective View

Ajit Mondal¹
Jayanta Mete²

Abstract

The Indian poet-educator Rabindranath Tagore was one of those who in his whole life tried to spread the spirit of co-operation, brotherhood and universalism through education. In 1988 Debendranath Tagore dedicated the land and buildings towards establishment of a Brahmavidyalaya. Rabindranath's school Brahmacharyasrama which started functioning formally from December 22, 1901 with no more than five students on the roll, was in part, a fulfilment of the wishes of his father who was a considerable figure of his time in the field of educational reforms. Tagore's own ideas about education of children was attempted to be realised in his creation- Santiniketan. His effort in building Santiniketan was to create a place of unconventional learning and universal harmony. His school was decidedly different in every way from the conventional ones. This article intends to present the historical background of Tagore's school at Santiniketan and explore the unique features of the school he built.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Brahmacharya, Santiniketan, Education, Universalism, Development

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore was not a pedagogue in the traditional sense of the term in as much as he has not written any educational treatise worthy of name like Plato (*The Republic*), Rousseau (*Emile*), Froebel (*Education of Man*) and Dewey (*Democracy and Education*). Rabindranath's educational ideas are reflected in his various essays on education, speeches delivered on different occasions and private letters. His earliest educational writing is *Shikshar Herpher* (Incongruities in Education, 1892). A compilation of his writings entitled "Education" (*Shiksha*) includes twenty-two articles relating to different aspects of education, which were written in between 1905–1936 (Purkait, 2001: 9). All his educational

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Surendranath College for Women (Affiliated to University of Calcutta), 24, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Kolkata - 700009, E-mail: mondalajit.edn@gmail.com

² Professor, Department of Education, University of Kalyani, Post Office - Kalyani, District – Nadia, Pin – 741235, West Bengal – 741235, E-mail: jayanta_135@yahoo.co.in

ideas mainly developed through his critiques of the then education system and from his own observed experiences while running *Santiniketan* (the school, established in 1901), *Visva-Bharati* (the university, established in 1921) and *Sriniketan* (the vocational-technical school, established in 1922) as learning centres. No other creative artist in the world, so far as we know, devoted so much time, talent and energy to the field of education as Tagore had done. Tagore's ideas about the education of children were realised in Santiniketan, which he built.

The idea of Visva-Bharati grew out of a school '*Ashram Vidyalaya*' which is the manifestation of Tagore's idea of education and is the bedrock of Visva-Bharati (Banerjee, 2009: 18). The school founded by Rabindranath Tagore is known as the *Path-Bhavana* (Study House) today. The school completed hundred years of its existence in 2001. It draws students from all over the state of West Bengal and remains a reputed institution. The school had a rather modest beginning. In December, 1901, Tagore started the school with only five students; one of them was his own son, Rathindranath Tagore. By the beginning of the twentieth century Tagore had already become a well-known poet. Why then did he think of starting a school at Bolpur? What was his creative urge which led him to venture beyond his peaceful literary pursuits? In what sense was his school different from the conventional ones? We explore these questions in this article.

The Poet's School – the Historical Background

Rabindranath founded the Santiniketan School in his father's Ashram in 1901. The Ashram had been started way back in 1863 when Debendranath Tagore bought twenty bighas of land from Bhubanmohan Sinha, landlord of Raipur in the southern Bengal district of Birbhum. He built a guest-house on that land and called it *Santiniketan* (The Abode of Peace), and the place came to be called by the same name. It became an Ashram by a Deed of Trust in 1888 to enable householders from all religions and backgrounds to spend time in prayer and meditation away from their domestic responsibilities. The Deed of Trust included the provision for establishing a school and for holding an annual fair where the villagers could exhibit their produce. In 1901, Rabindranath obtained his father's permission to start a school in the Ashram as the first step in implementing his ideas of a new Indian education (Das Gupta, 2004:26). Santiniketan was located within two miles of the Bolpur Railway Station on the East Indian Railway line. It was about a hundred miles north-west of Calcutta. The school was situated in the heart of nature but not too far from a big city. Started in 1901 with five boys and five teachers, the school was called the *Brahmacharya* (a life of abstinence and discipline during student life) Ashram. After the first year the name was changed to *Brahmavidyalaya*.

If we go through Tagore's comprehensive work on education, a crucial question naturally arises as to what is there in the background behind the foundation of his Santiniketan School. If we understand this background, many answers emerge. To explain the background behind the foundation of the school, Tagore himself wrote:

I must confess it is difficult for me to say what the idea which underlies my institution is. For, the idea is not like a fixed foundation upon which a building is erected. It is more like a seed which cannot be separated and pointed out directly as it begins to grow into a plant. And I know what it was to which this school owes its origin. It was not any new theory of education, but the memory of my school-days (Tagore, 1933: 109).

The Santiniketan School was really an answer to his childhood grief. Tagore's own unfortunate experiences as a child in a city school in Calcutta left an indelible impression on his mind. He confessed, "When I was thirteen I finished going to school. I do not want to boast about it, I merely give it to you as historical fact ... I afterwards realised that what then weighed on my mind was the unnatural pressure of the system of education, which prevailed everywhere" (Tagore: 1925: 9). We also know from his 'Reminiscences' how unhappy he was with the kind of schools he was sent to in his childhood. He wrote:

The rooms were cruelly dismal with their walls on ground like police man. The houses were more like a pigeonholed box than a human habitation. No decoration, no picture, not a touch of colour, not an attempt to attract the child's mind (Tagore, 1961a: 60-61).

The painful experiences of his school life left such a permanent imprint on his mind that even after forty years he could vividly describe the humiliation to which he was subjected. He stated in his own words: "We had to sit like specimens of some museum while lessons were pelted on us from high like hailstorms on flowers" (Chakraborty, 1961: 214).

In choosing Santiniketan he may have looked for a place where his children could grow up touched by nature, beyond the restrictions of urban living. He strongly believed that only in the lap of mother-nature a dream can bloom with a promise of colourful petals. That's why he said in 'My School':

I selected a beautiful place, far away from the contamination of town life, for I myself, in my young days, was brought up in that town in the heart of India, Calcutta, and all the time I had a sort of homesickness for some distant lane somewhere, where my heart, my soul, could have its true emancipation. Though I had no experience of the outer world, I had in my heart great longing to go away from my enclosure of those walls and from that huge, stone-hearted step-mother, Calcutta., I knew that the mind has its hunger for the ministrations of nature, mother-nature, and so I selected this spot where the sky is unobstructed to the verge of the horizon. There the mind could have its fearless freedom to create its own dreams and the seasons could come with all their colours and movements and beauty into the very heart of the human dwelling...(Tagore, 1931, in Alam & Chakravarty, 2011: 56).

In another essay under the same title 'My School', he emphasized the importance of an empathetic sense of interconnectedness with the surrounding world:

We have come to this world to accept it, not merely to know it. We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy. The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence. But we find that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but it is severely repressed. From our very childhood habits are formed and knowledge is imparted in such a manner that our life is weaned away from nature and our mind and the world are set in opposition from the beginning of our days. Thus the greatest of educations for which we came prepared is neglected, and we are made to lose our world to find a bagful of information instead. We rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him grammar. His hunger is for the Epic, but he is supplied with chronicles of facts and dates ... Child-nature protests against such calamity with all its power of suffering, subdued at last into silence by punishment (Tagore, 1917: 116–17).

He again wrote in 'A Poet's School': "The founding of my school had its origin in the memory of that longing for freedom which seems to go back beyond the sky-line of my birth" (Tagore, 1964: 238).

In December 1901, the school with a modest boarding house was started by Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan with the object of providing, as reported by the *Visva-Bharati Bulletin* of January 1924, to a number of children an education which would not be divorced from life, where pupils would become members of a larger family and regard the affairs of the institution as their own, and where they would live and grow in an atmosphere of freedom, mutual trust and happiness.

The school was a conscious repudiation of the system introduced in India by the British rulers. Rabindranath sought to realise the intrinsic values of the ancient education in India. Because of his aversion to the process of education prevailing in those days, Tagore grew into a revolutionary against the educational system in vogue and hence disparaged the initiation of the West in Indian Educational System. In "My School" Tagore spoke of his mission to revolutionize education by rearing young minds in harmony with nature. He described the trauma of his own schooldays and germination of his vision of a new form of education through his experiments with the school at Santiniketan (Alam & Chakravarty, 2011: 38). He satirically wrote, "What we now call a school in their country is really a factory and the teachers are parts of it ..." (Tagore, 1961b: 66).

Our education system is joyless. Small children are burdened with tons of books. Tagore again 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" (Ibid p. 67). Rabindranath wanted to break the isolation of school from home and society. His aim was to bridge the gap between school and home on one hand and between school and society on the other.

The school was to be residential in character and more or less modelled after the ancient hermitage schools of great sages of India, with simple leaf-grass thatched cottages for residence and open air classes under the trees. Prof. Das Gupta (1983) opined that emphasis on Indian culture was strong in early Santiniketan modelled on the forest schools of old, a hermitage (p. 87). Immensely impressed by the *tapovana* (hermitage) system of education of ancient India, Tagore wanted to follow the Ashram ideal of education at the Santiniketan School.

All these factors might have prompted Rabindranath to found his residential school in Bolpur. The school owed its origin to the ideas of Rabindranath, but he did not have any practical experience about the management of a school. Fortunately there were people who evinced keen interest in the school and who came forward to help him at the initial stage. Prominent among them were Brahmabandhav Upadhaya and Rewachand. Rewachand joined the school as a teacher. Upadhayay did not teach but he used to visit Santiniketan frequently and supervised the school and advised the founder. Soon it started to grow. Students from different walks of life and even other states of the country came to join the institution. In 1925 this Ashram school was named as *Patha-Bhavana*. What we know as Visva-Bharati was begun with the Brahmacharya Vidyalaya. That was how Santiniketan, as we have it today, began.

Uniqueness of Tagore's School – A Study

Rabindranath's school had some specific aspects which marked its difference from the conventional ones. The important feature that makes the school different from others is its open air classes with nature as the surrounding. Classes were held in open air in the shade of trees where man and nature entered into an immediate harmonious relationship.

The development of self-governance is an important component in the total educational experience of students at Bolpur. Tagore established the *Ashram Sammelani* – i.e., self-government with an objective to develop holistic personality of students. It was formed with the students through election. The main aim to form such an association was make students learn to carry out responsibilities in various matters of the school administration and thus be self-reliant and make their life in the Ashram happy and well-disciplined. There were seven departments or *Vibhagh* under this association to look after different matters. These are: Sahitya (literature), Shastha (health), Parivesh (environment), Krida (sports), Seba (service) Aaharjo (food) and Sakha Sangha (administration). These collaborative efforts helped in developing decision-making, self-discipline and self-respect in children.

A life of simplicity was a cardinal principle of Tagore's school. Teachers and students shared the common socio-cultural life. The Santiniketan School was conceived to be more than a school; a society in itself where teacher and pupil, house-holder and visitors all lived as neighbours. Tagore wanted children to feel the meaning of co-operation and friendship from

the beginning. Co-operation among teachers and the pupils was the driving force to hold sports and festivity. The teachers live in the dormitories with the boys, and are able therefore to help them in their work and share with them their daily life (Pearson, 1916:49). In Tagore's own words ('My School', 1925), the Brahmacharya Vidyalaya was: ... like a cage in which the birds are fed from the outside, but it was like a nest which students themselves co-operated in building up with their own life, with their love, with their daily work and their plays" (Tagore, 1931, in Alam & Chakravarty, 2011: 58).

The co-existence of boys and girls in a single educational set up was quite a new thing then in India. Almost after a decade since it began, girls first came to the Brahmavidyalaya in 1908. In 1922 a separate section for girls was organized. The girls and boys were given the same courses to study, but there was a difference in certain assigned activities. The girls were given the responsibility of looking after the younger boys in the children's section and also of attending to sick children. Tagore again said in the same essay, "... very often the boys and girls go out together on excursions; the boys help the girls in bringing fuel and fetching water and the girls cook the dinners for the boys and everything is managed by mutual help. That is a great education in itself (Ibid. p.58).

Guarding against any nationalistic prejudice among the students was a hallmark of Tagore's school. Rabindranath invited lecturers from Europe and distant western countries to his school. Their proximity to the foreign teachers helped them to overcome the so-called nationalistic feeling and to embrace things of distant origin. In his school his students learned through their early training freedom from the barriers of country, caste, creeds, race and prejudices. He believed that an open and happy education from a young age, in an environment of being with others from early on in life, would cure society of division and strife (Das Gupta, 2004: 22). On this Tagore wrote:

I have tried to save children from such vicious methods of alienating their minds which are fostered through books, through histories, geographies and lessons full of national prejudices. I have done it with the help of friends from the West. In the East there is a great deal of bitter resentment against Western races, which rankles in our hearts, and in our own homes we are brought up in feelings of hatred. I have tried to save the children from that, and these friends from the West, with their understanding, with their human sympathy and love, have done as a great service (Tagore, 2000:13).

The other very important aspect in the school was freedom. The idea of freedom was used creatively in the Santiniketan School. Tagore was against any form of corporal punishment to impose discipline. He wanted discipline to come from within, from the pursuit of noble and high ambitions in life. In this connection Tagore wrote:

My idea was that education should be a part of life itself and must not be detached from it and be made into something abstract. And so when I brought these children around me, I allowed them to live a complete life. They had perfect freedom to do

what they wished, as much liberty as was possible for me to give them and in all their activities I tried to put before them something which would be interesting to them. I tried to arouse their interests in all things, in nature's beauty and the surrounding villages; and also in literature, through play-acting, through listening to music in a natural manner, not through merely class teaching.”(Tagore, 1931 in Alam & Chakravarty, 2011:57).

Moreover, Tagore felt that a curriculum should revolve organically around nature with classes held in the open air under the trees to provide a spontaneous appreciation of the fluidity of the plant and animal kingdoms, and seasonal changes. Tagore believed that changes of seasons corresponded to changes in mind-set. He visualised the festivals as a way to develop spirituality. Nature walks and excursions were a part of the curriculum and students were encouraged to follow the life cycles of insects, birds and plants. Tagore wrote in the essay 'My School' (1925):

Knowing something of the natural school which Nature herself supplies to all her creatures, I chose a delightful spot and used to hold my classes under big shady tree. I taught them all I could. I played with them ... We have there the open beauty of the sky, and the different seasons revolve before our eyes in all the magnificence of their colour. Through this perfect touch with nature we took the opportunity of instituting festivals of the seasons (Tagore, 2000: 12 - 13).

In keeping with his theory of subconscious learning, Rabindranath never talked or wrote down specific lessons for the students, but rather involved them with whatever he was writing or composing. The students were allowed access to the room where he read his writings to teachers and critics, and they were encouraged to read out their writings in special literary evenings. In teaching also he believed in presenting difficult levels of literature, which the students might not fully grasp but which would stimulate them. The highest education, according to Tagore, is that “which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence” (Tagore, 1917:116). He considered education as an inspiration and emphasized the need for drawing out the potentialities instead of pouring information (Bhattacharya, 2012:64). According to Tagore, education should be in perfect harmony with men's complete life, economical, intellectual, aesthetic, social and spiritual. Tagore proposed that “Our educational institutions should be in the very heart of our society, connected with it by the living bonds of varied co operations. For true education is to realize at every step how our training and knowledge have organic connection with our surroundings (Tagore, 2011:8).

Reaching out to a larger humanity was essential to Tagore's educational endeavour at Brahmacharya Vidyalaya. The Santiniketan Ashram was surrounded by villages. The students of Santiniketan rendered service to the society they lived in. They also took part in the village work connected with the school. They contributed their knowledge of scientific and latest means of cultivation and of fighting diseases. That was the way

to serve the purpose of education by living a complete life. When traditional educationists poured academic information into minds of students, Tagore kindled his students' spirit gradually by engaging them in all kinds of activities. He reiterated in the essay 'My School' (1925): Our students began to be of service to our neighbours, to help them in various ways and to be in constant touch the life around them. They had their own freedom to grow, which is the greatest possible gift for the child life. There was also another kind of freedom at which we aimed, the freedom of sympathy with humanity, a freedom from all racial and national prejudice (Tagore, 2000:13).

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Conclusion

What may be said in conclusion is that the education imparted in Tagore's school was fully life-centred. Santiniketan School represented education of intellect, mind, body and feeling. Tagore's educational experiments at Santiniketan School were ground-breaking in many ways. 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.

Conflict between romantic life of imagination and life of action and sacrifice; the unhappy experience of school; the rigid routine of home education programme; his journey to the Himalayas with his saint-like father at the age of eleven; the enlightened family environment were all major influences and forces that propelled Tagore to establish the Brahmacharya Vidyalaya. He also felt an inner surging urge to occupy himself in some worthwhile service to mankind in which his spirituality would find fulfilment. Its unique features are co-curricular activities, integral socio-cultural life of students and teachers, development of an unbiased attitude towards life, open-air classes, training on self-governance, education in and through activity, freedom in education and delight in education. Initially known as Brahmacharya Vidyalaya, this was the nucleus around which Visva-Bharati has grown. Santiniketan represents education of the mind, heart and soul, Visva- Bharati stands for education of the intellect, a meeting place of the East and the West, and national integration and international amity. Sriniketan represents education of hand. The three institutions combined to make education complete and total.

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