

RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S ECOLOGY OF EDUCATION

From Ideation to Implementation

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For someone who had little or no regard for institutional schooling, Rabindranath Tagore's efforts to establish three institutions—Santiniketan (1901), Visva-Bharati (1921) and Sriniketan (1922)—in the last 40 years of his life might seem paradoxical. He was aware of the “incongruities” and gave his tailored responses to satisfy his audience's curiosity. For instance, during his visit to Japan in 1925, he jokingly told a group of Japanese students how his schooling came to an end at the age of 13. While addressing another group of Japanese female students, the “comrade poet” explained that he took up his educational mission because he had heard a call to rescue young schoolchildren from the cruelty of their teachers (in Bhattacharya 4). He shared the same idea during his visit to Moscow when he talked about the “cheerless surrounding” and “unsympathetic teachers” of the colonial schools in India that led him to leave school at an early age (Alam 96). In an essay titled “My Educational Mission” written for the periodical *The Modern Review*, Tagore wrote:

When I was young, I underwent the mechanical pressure of a teaching process, one of man's most cruel and most wasteful mistakes. I felt it my duty to found a school where the children might be free in spite of the school.

(Das, vol. 3: 1931)

Elsewhere, Tagore identified the mechanical process with the West and wanted a home-grown education for his people struggling for a national identity in a colonial context (“The Centre of Indian Culture”).

Tagore expressed his ideas on education in his polemical writings as well as in his creative works. However, he did not simply stop at the ideation level; he went on to give shape to his ideas by establishing institutions

that would change the lives of his compatriots. He approached his ideas with a poet's imagination, not with the pedantic attitude of a traditional teacher, "as a work of art and not that of a pedagogical laboratory" (Das, vol. 3: 626). Tagore concedes that the idea of the school was constantly evolving in his mind, and the process was so "elusive that the picture of its unity [could not] be analysed" (Das, vol.3: 626). The chapter attempts to elucidate the elusive nature of Tagore's educational ideas and their execution.

On the surface, his involvement in the school projects can be construed as his search for an alternative learning space that he lacked while growing up. At a deeper level, Tagore's enthusiastic engagement with these educational projects testifies to his commitment to a cause greater than his personal needs. Although the school was initiated by his father Debendranath as a traditional *ashram* for meditation, Tagore gradually changed it and turned it into his signature mission that required many sacrifices. His association with the school project coincided with a series of tragic misfortunes that made him reflect on and negotiate with death. In "The Problem of Evil," Tagore observes that death should not be a limiting experience; through an active participation in life, especially by sacrificing one's self for the sake of others, one could overcome the trauma associated with the loss of one's loved ones: "He truly belongs to individuals who is not included in his own individuality, and whom he is never even likely to know" (*Sadhana* 55).

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to trace Tagore's attitudes towards education not only in the institutions he built but also in his creative works. This chapter will argue that this "myriad minded man"¹ approached education from multiple perspectives to ascertain the role and scope of various stakeholders of education: students, teachers, community, nation and, by extension, the world. It will examine selected essays, letters, poems and short stories by Tagore to argue that the poet took his cue from nature to seek an organic chain of harmony, creative unity or rhythm to interlink all his intangible ideas and their material representations. He thereby developed an ecology of education that can be recognised as an indigenous, albeit ingenious, type of liberal arts that prepares students with the lived experience to brace against the merely practical, material and visible world. The chapter will end by suggesting how Tagore's ideas are finding currency in a changing world where liberal arts has suddenly become the basis of education in this era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

Tagore had written and spoken on multiple occasions about the need for an alternative educational platform for India reflective of its history, traditions and culture and the symbiotic growth of a school, leading to a university with its rural reconstruction mission through a community programme for mostly tribal boys and women in the vicinity, which demonstrates Tagore's merger of poetics and praxis. Tagore created an interface between poetics and praxis to obliterate the pervading ignorance in society

and remind Indians of their essential humanistic values that were lost in the modern mechanical life and its pedantic, soulless and success-driven pedagogical models.

Tagore dedicated the last 40 years of his life to developing an indigenous educational paradigm. By the time he gave his Hibbert lectures at Oxford University in 1930, published as *The Religion of Man* (1931), he had assumed the role of a world teacher who both sensed the tragic divisions in the world and volunteered his service to remedy them. In these lectures, Tagore explained the philosophical basis of his educational model. He affirmed that his system was holistic and indigenous in orientation and yet global in outlook; it was creative in conception and yet interdisciplinary in expression. At an individual/spiritual level, Tagore's educational vision involved connecting humanity with nature, or the finite with the infinite. At a social/national level, he wanted to eschew the lines that separate different communities into different social, religious and economic categories. At a global/international level, he wanted to bridge the technology-driven gap between the East and the West. He toured the greater part of his later life worldwide to create awareness about and raise funds for his educational projects. At the time of inception, these ideas may have sounded poetical, impractical and even wasteful. After more than a century, the ecology of education Tagore envisioned to free his people's minds can find its affinities with the broad-based vision of liberal arts, which is making a comeback amid the hype over the business and technology-oriented specialised education. For instance, the president of Stanford University, Marc Tessier-Lavigne, said to his colleagues in his 2016 inauguration speech that the pendulum is shifting from STEM to liberal arts education. For a university to be purposeful, he said, "we must reaffirm the importance and value of a broad or liberal education—liberal in the sense of 'liberating the mind'" ("The Purposeful University: A Place of Unlimited Potential").

Tagore's first project was to change the ashram that his father had started in the scenic natural setting of Santiniketan ("abode of peace"), in the district of Bolpur, West Bengal, in 1863, into a school that would provide a skeletal shape to his vision of education. The school built at the turn of the century in 1901 later inspired him to establish a university, Visva-Bharati ("India in the World"), in 1921. His community engagement in the reconstruction of the rural areas took the shape of Sriniketan ("abode of prosperity") the following year. The centrifugal growth of these three institutions aligns with Tagore's mission of dealing with the darkness of the mind before spreading the light of education outside of his own self. He knew that before spreading knowledge he must tackle the issue of ignorance.² In "The Problem of Self," included in *Sadhana* (1913), he observed:

In the typical thought of India, it is held that the true deliverance of man is the deliverance from *avidya*, from ignorance. It is not in

destroying anything that is positive and real, for that cannot be possible, but that which is negative, which obstructs our vision of truth. When this obstruction, which is ignorance, is removed, then only is the eyelid drawn up which is no loss to the eye.

(72)

At the same time, Tagore did not want the self to be cut off from its cultural roots; instead, he wanted it to assume a universal personality by attaining inner truth. Tagore was not the kind of person who rejected anything Western outright. He knew that the colonial exchange had introduced the Western model of “ethical freedom,” “liberty of conscience, liberty of thought and action, liberty in the ideals of art and literature” to the East (*Nationalism*, ctd. in Guha 180). Then again, the West, which once led scientific development, was fast becoming an “emissary of death” in the post–World War I era. The “god-like” Europe, much to the disappointment of Tagore, was failing to utilise science in a “godly” way for the benefit of humankind (Mortuza 286).

Tagore reminds his readers that the Indian tradition of education is not devoid of scientific enlightenment. In his poem “Kalpana,” he credits his friend Jagadish Chandra Bose for bringing accolades to India. For Tagore, Bose sought to introduce “an Eastern spirituality within a materialist western science and thereby [seek] to establish a new scientific paradigm to create ‘a new East for the West’” (Banerjee). In “An Indian Folk Religion,” Tagore argues that the ancient monastic tradition of Buddhism did not make any distinction between science and religion:

We find the arts and sciences springing up in its wake, institutions started for alleviating the misery of all creatures, human and non-human, and great centers of education founded. Some mighty power was suddenly roused from its obscurity, which worked for long centuries and changed the history of man in a large part of the world. And that power came into its full activity only by the individual being made conscious of his infinite worth. It was like the sudden discovery of a great mine of living wealth.

(*Creative Unity* 73–74)

In the Hindu seats of learning at Nalanda and Taxila, he saw a similar tradition of learning that could withstand the boastful claim of West’s supremacy in education. While Tagore was critical of mindless reproduction of Western models, he saw potential in a “common pursuit of truth” and a “shared heritage” at his newfound Eastern university, which he considered a meeting ground of East and West:

We must find some meeting-ground, where there can be no question of conflicting interests. One of such places is the University, where

we can work together in a common pursuit of truth, share together our common heritage, and realise that artists in all parts of the world have created forms of beauty, scientists discovered secrets of the universe, philosophers solved the problems of existence, saints made the truth of the spiritual world organic in their own lives, not merely for some particular race to which they belonged, but for all mankind. When the science of meteorology knows the earth's atmosphere as continuously one, affecting the different parts of the world differently, but in a harmony of adjustments, it knows and attains truth. And so, too, we must know that the great mind of man is one, working through the many differences which are needed to ensure the full result of its fundamental unity. When we understand this truth in a disinterested spirit, it teaches us to respect all the differences in man that are real yet remain conscious of our oneness; and to know that perfection of unity is not in uniformity, but in harmony.

(*Creative Unity* 171–72)

This long excerpt suggests how Tagore's vision of an Eastern university ultimately articulates his cosmopolitan vision of one shared humanity. He remains a champion of truth that has unity in harmony as its building block.

However, such a vision of harmonious coexistence was considered problematic at the height of the nationalist movement in India, when Gandhi was making an all-out call for non-cooperation against the British. The pitfalls of the Gandhian brand of nationalism were tackled head-on by Tagore. He expressed his dissatisfaction over the xenophobia of the *swadeshi* movement in his essay "India and the West" where he observed that "different advocates are engaged in pleading the rival causes of Hindu, Moslem or westerner," but for him, the only battle that mattered was the "eternal one between truth and untruth" (cited in Guha 173). Tagore urges his readers to go beyond the myopic vanity of emphasising too much on the Self while ignoring the essential contributions of the Other. The wholesale rejection of the West was, for Tagore, morally detrimental. The fallacy of one's own position as the only right one is discussed in Tagore's essay "Excess of Nationalism." In it, he exemplifies the European version of "public good" that they propagated through their pursuit of liberty. His humanitarian self has no qualms in asserting that such Western ideals complement his vision that "West is necessary to the East. We are complementary to each other because of our different outlooks upon life which have given us different aspects of truth" (in Guha 181). He concludes the essay by saying that the West should not assume a position of power by thinking that its educational mission in India involves "teaching the ignorant and helping the weak" (Guha 183).

In creating a university that is the world's "nest" and India's gift to the world, Tagore upheld his nationalistic pride while extending "intellectual

and moral sympathy” to all mankind. In an address before the Mayor of Madras, he explains the background of Visva-Bharati:

The ideal of education which Visva-Bharati dreams of realising in spite of the obstacles of all kinds, is to help in the development of intellectual and moral sympathy for one’s fellow-beings, the spirit of service and sacrifice, and the dauntless attitude of refusal towards evil of all kinds in the face of calumny and persecution.

(*The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 7: 925)

The peace and tolerance that he championed was mainly due to the progressive and liberal environment he was brought up in. Without a proper understanding of Tagore’s personal life, it is probably impossible to understand his educational ideals. Tagore was born in a landed aristocracy in West Bengal, which provisioned him with the cultural and symbolic capital to construct an educational model of his own. Tagore recounts the shaping influence of his own family on him in his *My Boyhood Days*. He recalls the presence of the best intellectual and cultural figures in his household: “Pandits of the deepest learning would visit father’s drawing room to discuss the scriptures and the sciences; musicians would display their skill. Such people made our house a living university” (qtd. in Bhattacharya 17).

Tagore’s Jorasanko mansion had the affluence of a traditional zamindari established by his grandfather Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, one of the first Indian businessmen to trade with the British with an equal partnership. Dwarkanath was a close friend of the reformist Raja Rammohun Roy and participated in the promotion of the *Brahmo Samaj* movement. This privileged background did not mean that it was easy for him to initiate a system that was at odds with both Western and indigenous models. A young Tagore was sent to several schools on different occasions, in both India and England; his mind proved too restless to be confined to the rigours of traditional schools. In his memoir, *My Boyhood Days*, he compares himself to an insect that was out of synch with the wooden furniture of the classroom. “There is a kind of grasshopper which takes the colour of the withered leaves among which it lurks unobserved. In like manner, my spirit also shrank and faded among those faded, drab coloured days” (Bhattacharya 36).

Tagore started the Santiniketan school with just five students, including his second child Rathindranath. One can only assume that he did not want his son to go through the experience he encountered in formal school settings in childhood. Tagore remained a self-educated man who learned from the tutors and servants at home or from his travels abroad. Mohammad A. Quayum, in his introduction to Tagore’s translated collection of short stories, *The Ruined Nest and Other Stories*, refers to the “the reign of servants or ‘servocracy’” mentioned in *My Reminiscences* to point out how some of the household retainers would draw a circle around him to restrict his

mobility. This created a natural quest in him to go beyond all ordained boundaries (Quayum, *The Ruined Nest* 9–10).

The factual account of many of his traumatic experiences related to being “tutored” at school and home, recorded in both of his childhood memoirs *Jeevansmriti* (*My Reminiscences*) and *Amar Chhelebelā* (*My Boyhood Days*), find their fictional expression in a short story titled “Chhuti” (The Holiday). The story narrates the life of a 13-year-old boy, Fatik, who is sent to Kolkata for education and stay there with his maternal uncle’s family. The boy suffocates in his school environment as he keeps thinking of his village days. He is ignored and bullied by his teachers and classmates at school for his indifference and lack of focus. While trying to run away from his throttled life in the city, he gets wet in the rain and becomes fatally ill. The sarcastic title connotes a release from both school and life. Repeatedly, Tagore imagines himself as a child in bondage with an innate desire to be free. His poem “Taal Gaach” (Palm Tree) is also a case in point:

On one leg stands the palm tree
Over the canopy
Peeping into the sky
Wishing to rise through the clouds,
And fly.
Oh, if it only had wings!

(Tagore, “Palm Tree”)

This poem from his book *Shishu Bholanath* demonstrates his ability to use artistic imagination to escape from the confinement of his home. Through the use of pathetic fallacy, the child narrator relates himself to the tall tree that is rooted to the ground. The rustling of the leaves makes him feel that the tree harbours the desire to fly away just like he wants to do in his imagination. The cognitive process shows the child’s emotional maturity to come to terms with his own predicament. His thoughts are not schooled but intuitively perceived. This is the basis of his educational philosophy. And in verse he finds its logical expression. Speaking to some of his Western friends in London in 1930, Tagore acknowledged that the rhyme comes to him naturally:

When at the age of five, I was compelled to learn and repeat the lessons from my textbooks, I had the notion that literature had its mysterious manifestations on the printed pages Then, by chance, I discovered that verse making was not beyond the range of an untrained mind and tottering handwriting. Since then, my sole medium of expression has been words, followed at sixteen by music, which also come to me as a surprise.

(Anand 28)

It is also true for his creative, personal and professional life, as harmony or rhythm, Tagore believed, connects one thing with another. Explaining his own background of painting, he wrote: “the only training which I had from my young days was the training in rhythm; rhythm in thought, rhythm in sound” (Anand 30). Thus, the “unschooled” painter posited, “One thing which is common to all arts is the principle of rhythm, which transforms inert materials into living creatures” (Anand 30). The same principle of rhythm applies to his educational model introduced to tackle the “ugliness” or avidya (ignorance) in society. Even when we see how he transforms scratched out texts in his manuscripts to give them pictorial shapes, we realise that he wanted to give a beautiful shape to something “ugly.” The editorial scratches, including the blotted lines of his paintings, come alive with the free-flowing touch of the poet-painter who somehow manages to find the right balance between the blank space and the ink on his paper. His ideas effortlessly flow to deal with what he considers darkness, ignorance or non-truth and replace it with his conception of truth.

The same search for harmony is evident in the dance genres he introduced. He was dismayed by the way the position of dance was relegated in his contemporary India. Once performed in temples to express devotion to the gods, dance was later associated with the performances of the courtesans. Tagore attempted to free “both the art of dancing, and the forms of dance from the cobwebs of superstition, social apathy, and moral turpitude” (Pal, “Introduction” 21). Tagore’s engagement with different art forms underlies his negotiations with what he deemed as vidya/avidya; his solution for a creative unity permeates his model of education. Tagore’s ideation, the epiphanic moments of self-realisation, are strongly reflective of his concept of education. The space where creativity is generated is also equally important to him. This is evident in his characterisation of the spatial Santiniketan. He wrote:

From the beginning I tried to create an atmosphere which I considered to be more important than the class teaching. The atmosphere of nature’s own beauty was there waiting for us from a time immemorial with her varied gifts of colours and dance, flowers, and fruits, with the joy of her mornings and the peace of her starry nights ... we ought to acknowledge its compelling invitation.

(Das 627)

He was keenly aware that practical people may think of his school as an idealist poetic project and a total waste. He sounds like the French Romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau with his urge to be educated in a primitive and pristine setting. The overemphasis on nature may sound fanciful, but it is a protest against the Western model of education that relied on expensive infrastructures. The cage image in his short story “The Parrot’s

Training” expounds the idea. Tagore is never in short supply of images when it comes to explaining his rhetorical arguments artistically. For instance, to show his scorn for the money spent on Western education, he compares the idea to spending a lot of money to buy a wallet where one is supposed to keep money. His prose is replete with many such poetic devices. He presents his ideas with metaphors and symbols so that his abstract concepts become concrete. His explanation of the general economy is a case in point. He says:

The silkworm seems to have a cash value credited in its favour somewhere in Nature's accounting department ... but the butterfly is irresponsible. The significance which it may possess has neither weight nor use, and is lightly carried on its pair of dancing wings. Perhaps it pleases someone in the heart of the sunlight, the Lord of colours, who has nothing to do with account books and has a perfect mastery in the great art of wastefulness.

(“A Poet's School” 23)

In his short story “The Painter,” a young boy Chuni shows a special knack for painting at an early stage, even though they defy the ordinary rules of drawing. He would draw cats that would look like dogs. The boy's genius is immediately discerned by the connoisseur of art Rangalal, who said, “After many years I see a genius whose work comes straight from his soul. It is flawless. He is as old as the god who creates beauty” (Quayum, *The Ruined Nest* 248). The mother Satyabati knows that “preoccupation with money” would be harmful to her son's “moral growth” (247). The story ends with the mother withdrawing the child from his uncle's practical proposition and handing him over to the mentor artist, Rangalal. One cannot thus separate creativity from the creator in any of Tagore's creation. Tagore acts like the creator who speaks to bring things into being. All the apparent meaningful images find their shape in the institutions that he has created. He is the lord of colours who painted the abodes of peace and prosperity.

Echoing Tagore's title, Ranjan Ghosh thinks that Tagore's is “The Poet's School” that pursues a biocentric pedagogy. Ghosh, however, argues that Tagore's “ecological self” can transcend both individualism and holism. By locating students in nature, Tagore wanted to create consciousness that sees nature as an extension of the self:

[It] is an energy flow where individuals are like ‘local perturbations’ having an awareness of individualism and a sense of being a part of the whole. Endorsing *friluftsliv* (open-air life), Tagorean ecosophy saw this learning amidst nature as partaking of a joyous energy flow (*lila*) whose foundation was in *tapasya* (mediation of restraint).

(Ghosh 18)

The influence of open-air life on education is evident in his short story, "The Postmaster." Tagore wrote this story, like many others, during his visit to the estate house at Shahzadpur in present-day Bangladesh. In a letter to his niece in 1894, he wrote:

I feel the mood and the will to write here as nowhere else. The living essence of the outside world floats in freely in verdurous waves of light and air and sound and scent that mingled with the bewitched mind and mould it into story after story Noontime is Shahzadpur is high noon for story writing. It was at this time, I recall, that my story "The Postmaster" took over my thoughts.

(Robinson 74)

The plot however depicts the alienating effect of urban education. The educated postmaster comes to the village out of bare necessity and feels disconnected from the rural setting. One day, while listening to the song of a bird, he feels the urgency to have some human companionship. So he starts teaching alphabets to his helping hand, Ratan, a young orphan girl from the village, under this effect of nature:

The rain-washed, shiny, rustling leaves of trees and, in the white light of a partly sunny day, the piled-up clouds gathering in layers in the sky after the rain was really a sight to see. The postmaster observed that sight attentively and wondered what if he had someone he loved close by then ... the plaintive monotone of the bird and the surging noise of the foliage in an afternoon landscape, void of human presence, were also perhaps telling a similar story Heaving a deep sigh, the postmaster called out, 'Ratan'

'Dadababu, did you call me?'

'I'll teach you how to read bit by bit every day,' the postmaster replied. With that, he spent the whole afternoon teaching her the alphabets, and in a few days finished teaching her the compound letters.

("The Postmaster" in Quayum,
The Ruined Nest 54)

The change in physical nature corresponds with the change in the inner nature of the postmaster. The symbolic use of rain shower and sun-soaked landscape exemplifies Tagore's interest in locating education outside the city limits to the natural setting of Bolpur.

Tagore wrote "The Postmaster" during one of his frequent visits to rural Bengal, where he mostly travelled to look after his family's agrarian estates. An urbanite male taking up the responsibility of teaching a rural girl is

informed by his awareness of the widening gap between the city and the village. The two characters in "The Postmaster" are based on real individuals he met at Shahzadpur. As the story progresses, the teacher fails to realise that Ratan was slowly morphing into a woman, and his so-called education has not prepared him for the real emotional human exchanges. There is a lesson in this romantic story of unrequited love. The postmaster can compensate with money for the service she rendered when he was ill. But there are emotions that money cannot buy. The postmaster fails miserably as a teacher as he does not have any understanding of his student. Suddenly, the lesson on compound letters becomes symbolic of the relationship. The postman leaves the girl with an incomplete education as he fails to let go of his own ego fully. It is no accident that the postmaster assumes the role of a teacher, even if for a short period of time, and then leaves his student after teaching her only a few compound letters. The irony hints at the pedagogical paradoxes that Tagore himself had to negotiate in his own personal life: he was brought up in a colonial milieu with privileged access to Western education in an urban setting, yet he ended up promoting a teaching model that searches for an indigenous root in its natural habitat.

The insensitivity of a teacher is best found in another of Tagore's short stories, "Ginni" ("Housewife"). A Grade 3 teacher Shibbanath chances upon seeing one of his students playing "doll marriage" with his sister. This schoolteacher is famed for physically and verbally abusing his students. He whines before his class that teachers have lost their prestige of being treated with godly devotions. For the students, he is nothing more than the god of death, Yama. Once while standing under the car shed of his student's house to protect himself from rain, he found Ashu role-playing in a doll bridal game. The teacher, let alone being apologetic for prying into the private life of his student, humiliates him in class by touting him as "ginni." The short story ends with the teacher going on his tiffin break while the classmates taunt the little boy calling him "ginni," a housewife. The teacher is not only indifferent to Ashu's condition but also unaware of the consequences of his action.

Tagore is universally addressed as *Kabiguru* and *Gurudev*, but he was never entirely comfortable with such honorifics. In the tradition of Hinduism or Tantrik Buddhism, *guru* refers to a teacher, and *diva* (the root word in Sanskrit that stands for both God and light) implies the guiding light. While these titles are testimonies of his "demeanour and dress" as well as his "commanding and spiritually inspiring" personality, Tagore reportedly objected to such titles "verbally on several occasions, denying that he was not anyone's guru" (Pal, "Introduction" 14). However, he remained committed to the traditional system of *gurukul*, where the master is always an object of search, a destination that is the realm of true knowledge, the realm of the creator.

The critical awareness of the agency involved in education is another issue that sets Tagore apart from other educators. In his plays, such as *Achalayatan*, *Muktodhara* and *Tasher Desh*, Tagore acknowledges the transformative role of education only to highlight that sometimes force is needed to free education from its iron cage or delusion.

One satirical story mentioned earlier in passing that deals with educational institutions but fails to take into account their students in devising their curricula or designing their structures is "The Parrot's Training." A songbird was brought in so that it could be taught the art of singing for the pleasure of the king. The first challenge for the nephews of the king who took charge of the bird's education was to build the right cage. Once in the cage, pages after pages of books were forced into the bird, just like Tagore was fed knowledge when he was a child. The teachers would have no consideration for Tagore's love for creativity and freedom; he was forced to memorise pages of books which was destructive to his imagination. The bird in the story met a similar fate. Let me quote the ending of the story in its entirety to show what Tagore felt about the caged education that he was up against:

The bird died.

Nobody had the least notion how long ago this had happened. The fault-finder was the first man to spread the rumour.

The Rajah called his nephews and asked them, 'My dear nephews, what is this that we hear?'

The nephews said: 'Sire, the bird's education has been completed.'

'Does it hop?' the Rajah enquired.

'Never!' said the nephews.

'Does it fly?'

'No.'

'Does it sing?'

'No.'

'Bring me the bird,' said the Rajah.

The bird was brought to him, guarded by the Kotwal and the Sepoys and the Sowars. The Rajah poked its body with his finger. It neither moved, nor uttered a groan. Only its inner stuffing of book-leaves rustled.

Outside the window, the murmur of the spring breeze amongst the newly budded Asoka leaves made the April morning wistful.

They decided that the ignorance of birds was due to their natural habit of living in poor nests. Therefore, according to the Pundits, the first thing necessary for this bird's education was a suitable cage.

The Pundits had their rewards and went home happy.

(Tagore, "The Parrot's Training")

This biting satire rails at the teachers, administrators and policymakers for failing to understand a student's needs. Tagore has shown how giving education to children in a natural setting can shape their consciousness to engage in the real world. Tagore knew that his reformation of the education sector was largely a product of his creative mind. However, he was confident that like every other creative outpouring, his institutions too would take an organic shape where the intangible will border the tangible, the infinite the finite. The essays, short stories, plays and poems discussed in this chapter show how the poet's creative world existed in tandem with the practical sense that saw the establishment of the three institutions. He insisted on critical thinking, creativity and lifelong learning, which are now considered the mainstay of the merging education sector that is negotiating with the neo-normal of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It is the visionary genius of Tagore that he could foresee the real skill sets that the world would need, without losing sight of the enrichment of the soul.

What he wrote in his "Ideal of Education" is still valid in the sense that it comprehends a humanitarian consciousness as a luminous space. He wrote,

Education in all its different forms and channels has its ultimate purpose in the evolving of a luminous sphere of human mind from the nebula that has been rushing round ages to find in itself an eternal centre of unity. We individuals, however small may be in power and whatever corner of the world we may belong to, have the claim upon us to add to the light of the consciousness that comprehends all humanity.

*(The English Writings of
Rabindranath Tagore, vol. 7: 834)*

The idea of humanism and internationalism as well as a fluid attitude towards education forms the basis of 4IR. In the editorial note to *Higher Education in the Era of Fourth Industrial Revolution*, Gleason shows how the long list of ten skill sets suggested for 2015 got distilled down to "cognitive flexibility and emotional intelligence" in 2020. In a post-industrial milieu, as human labour is being replaced by machines, the scope of education is more fluid than ever. Employees now "need to be agile and able to jump between very different types of tasks and contexts. He needs to change to better prepare thinkers of the 4IR" (5). The keyword here is "thinkers." Tagore did not want students to become mindless parrots. Throughout his early life, he saw how a mechanical form of education could kill one's inner self and stem creative unity and harmony. He wanted his students to be like birds in their natural setting, reflecting on their own connections with their surroundings and finding their own purpose. In other words, he was longing for an education system that would instil cognitive flexibility and emotional intelligence in his students.

Notes

- 1 Tagore's biographers Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson popularised the phrase "myriad-minded man" by using it in the title of their biography of Tagore. Kaiser Haq in an article critiques the choice of the title by pointing out "the ignorance" of the biographers about the "etymological history" of the phrase that was originally attributed to Shakespeare by Coleridge ("Pioneering a Tagore Revival" 61).
- 2 In Chapter 5, "Education for Tomorrow: The Vision of Rabindranath Tagore," Mohammad A. Quayum agrees with Chakravarty (1961) that Tagore's educational mission was like a "crusade" in which, as he explains in his letter to Sir Patrick Geddes, he wanted, "to emancipate children's mind[s] from the dead grips of a mechanical method and a narrow purpose." In the same letter, he further wrote, "[I have] merely started with this one simple idea that education should never be dissociated from life" (4).

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