

## Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

Tagore was a multi-splendoured personality and has left his deep impression on several facets of artistic, cultural, educational, intellectual, political and social life of India'. He was a great artist, an educationist, a poet and a patriot, a philosopher, and a reformer. There is no field of literature which he has not enriched by his contribution. He was a Nobel Prize winner.

*Early Life and Education:* Rabindranath Tagore was born in a family famous for its enlightened and progressive views. He was the fourteenth and the youngest son of Maharshi Devendranath and grandson of Dwarkanath Tagore. He was born at Calcutta on May 6, 1861. He wrote his first verse in his eighth year. He was introduced to the *Upanishads* and the *Ramayana* at a very young age. His school days were not happy.

In 1877, he went to England for becoming a barrister but soon returned to India. While still young his reputation as a poet began to spread.,

Tagore settled down at Shantiniketan in 1901 and began his educational experiments with five pupils.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 drew Tagore to politics and he composed patriotic songs but after two years he withdrew to Shantiniketan.

*Nobel Prize and International Fame:* Tagore burst into international fame when his book *Gitanjali* won him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. With the award of Nobel Prize, Tagore became a world figure in his own right. He utilised the entire amount of the award of \$8,000 for the upkeep of his school at Shantiniketan. This school which opened in a forest grove was patterned on the model of ancient *ashramas*. In 1921 the school grew into a University, called Visvabharati. Besides visiting England thrice, Tagore visited Europe, Japan, Russia and the United States.

*Return of the Title on account of Jallianwala Bagh Massacre:* The British Government made him 'Knight' in 1915 but he was so pained and stirred by Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar in 1919, that he returned the Insignia of Knighthood. At that time he wrote to the Viceroy of India, "The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in their incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen who,

for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings”.

### Tagore's Publications

1. *Shiksar Herpher* (Our Education and Its Incongruities)
2. *Shiksha Samasya* (The Problem of Education)
3. *Abaran* (Culture or Covering)
4. *Tapovan* (Forest Colony)
5. *Dharmashiksha* (Religious Education)
6. *Hindu Visvavidyalaya* (Hindu University)
7. *Strishiksha* (Women Education)
8. *Shiksar Bahan* (The Vehicle of Education)
9. *My School*
10. *Shiksar Milan* (The Meeting of Cultures)
11. *A Poet's School*
12. *Shiksar Vikiran* (Diffusion of Education)
13. *Ashramer Shiksha* (Education in Ashram)
14. *Bodher Sadhana* (Education of the Feeling)
15. *Several Convocation Addresses*

*Factors Influencing Tagore's Philosophy of Education:* Tagore's philosophy of education was influenced by the following factors:

1. Influence of the Home Environment.
2. Influence of the School Environment.
3. Love for Nature.
4. His Extensive Visits.

*Influence of the Home Environment:* Tagore was born in a family in which the time-honoured ways of Indian life and tradition of the land were strictly adhered to. His father taught him ancient Indian literature. He set before the family the Indian ideals by the example of his own life, by his talks and writings. After leaving the school, Rabindranath Tagore spent a good deal of his time in the company of his father. This constant companionship of his father exerted a great influence on his life.

*His Extensive Travels:* His wide travels and visits to different countries of the world and his contacts with people of different nations, developed in him a faith in the brotherhood of man and spiritual unity of humanity.

### Tagore's Naturalism: Background of Tagore's Naturalism

By nature, Tagore had a love for nature. His love for naturalism was strengthened on account of the artificial and unnatural environment of the schools he attended.

Tagore's life in the school was not happy. He felt himself like 'a parrot in the cage'. Tagore was unable to adjust himself to the 'dead routine and the teaching' of the educational institutions. His teachers pronounced that he was 'unfit' for studies. Tagore considered himself 'fortunate to escape'

from these 'book learning factories'. He observed later that "The Masters and Pandits who were charged with my education soon abandoned the thankless task... and realised that this boy could never be driven along the beaten track of learning".

Tagore considered school a place of great discomfort, "There was no particular trouble in the school. Yet after all, it was a school. The rooms were pitiless, its walls stood like sentries. There was nothing like a home in it, it was like a big box with many compartments".

Traditional school to him was like a 'prison house'. He observed, "It was more like a pigeon-holed box. The time spent had been thoroughly wasted". About his teachers he wrote, "Of the teachers, I remember only one, whose language was so foul that, out of sheer contempt for him, I steadily refused to answer any one of his questions". Further, he said, "I learnt about all the injustice, impatience, anger and partiality underlying the process of instruction, more easily than my lessons". The school according to him was "completely isolated from the surrounding life and beauty". It was a "restless nightmare like a jail... the whole thing was depressed".

"*A Poet's School*" is an important writing showing the place of Nature in life and education. Children have the gift of freshness of senses. They can become natural with Nature and human with the human society. "For our perfection we have to be vitally savage and mentally civilised". But the misery is that a child is offered crowded solitude in a city where man is everywhere, with never a gap for the immense non-human, the Nature. The inexpensive power to be happy that the children bring to this world is "Constantly worn away by friction with the brick-and-mortar arrangement of life". The city-built education does not take heed of the non-civilised in us, which thirst for colour, for music, for the movement of life. This is why Tagore tried his best to develop in the children of his school "the freshness of their feeling for nature, a sensitiveness of soul in their relationship with their human surrounding".

He pointed out the great significance of the school atmosphere in the life of children whose mind, like the tree, has the power to gather food and nourishment from its surroundings. The cultural atmosphere keeps the mind sensitive to rich racial inheritance, glorious traditions and concentrated wisdom of ages. The school atmosphere must also develop sensitiveness of soul and allow freedom to the mind from bondage of ignorance and apathy.

### ***Main Characteristics of Naturalism in Education***

1. *Aims of Education: Harmony with Nature.* According to Tagore, the highest aim of education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life harmonious with all existence. He notes that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but it is severely repressed. Tagore laments that 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 aim of education for which we come prepared, is neglected, and we are made to lose our world to find a handful of information instead. His hunger is for the Epics, but he is supplied with chronicles of facts and dates.

2. *Ideal School in Natural Surroundings: Tapovan (Forest Colony).* According to Tagore, the forests hold a message to us of peace and purity, of sublime feeling and pure joy—of austerity and renunciation. Nature in the forest Provides a grand perspective against which all objects, all feelings, lose their exaggerated shape and assume due proportions. In *Tapovan* a new idea is introduced. The message of the forest can be received and felt only through the expansion of sympathy or enlarging the feeling aspect within us. It is not the eye nor the ear, nor all the senses, not even the intellect that could read this grand message. It is only the feeling. One has to learn to feel, to enlarge the depth of feeling and the scope of sympathy. *Bodher Sadhana*, or what we may call 'Education of the Feeling'—that is really wanted. "We must constantly remember that neither the education of the senses, nor the education of the intellect, but the education of the feeling should receive the place of honour in our schools". That is why he pleads that "our true education is possible only in the forest, through intimate contact with Nature and purifying austere pursuits".

Tagore has observed, "It must be an *Ashram* where men have gathered for the highest end of life, in the peace of nature, where life is not merely meditative but fully awake in its activities". Tagore was convinced that "Our true education is possible only in the *Tapovan (Forest)* through intimate contact with nature and purifying austere pursuits". Tagore sings out:

"I feel the tenderness of the grass in my forest walk,  
the way-side flowers startle me:

That the gifts of the infinite are strewn in, the dust".

The school must enlarge the 'feeling' aspect. He wrote, "We must remember that neither the education of the senses, nor the education of the intellect, but the education of the feeling should receive the place of honour in our schools".

Tagore pointed out the great significance of the school atmosphere in the life of children whose mind, like the tree, has the power to gather food and nourishment from its surroundings. The cultural atmosphere keeps the mind sensitive to rich racial inheritance, glorious traditions and concentrated wisdom of ages. The school atmosphere must also develop sensitiveness of soul and allow freedom to the mind from bondage of ignorance and apathy.

There is a spiritual bondage between man and man, with ennobling effect of nature on the inmates. Music, songs, dancing, dramatics and other artistic activities are a daily routine. Tagore explains it in his own words: "Training in the use of limbs, development of the spirit of questioning, thinking and observation; cultivation of interest and enjoyment in trees, birds, the beasts

and the varied phenomena of nature; experience in the making of articles of daily use, habit of keeping one's living room and surrounding clean, healthy and beautiful practice of cleanliness extending to the body, dress and personal behaviour through adequate observance of both, wholesome discipline in eating, physical exercise and rest and careful maintenance of bodily and mental strength—these are essential to the life of this *Ashrama*".

### Pen Picture of an Ideal School

An ideal school, according to Tagore, should have the following characteristics; and he attempted to introduce these elements in his school at Bolpur, located at a distance of about one hundred miles from Calcutta. Later, this school became Shantiniketan and grew into Visvabharati.

1. The school should be situated in natural surroundings. There should prevail the atmosphere of nature's own beauty with her varied gifts of colours and dance, flowers and fruits, with the joy of her mornings and the peace of her starry nights.
2. It should provide an environment after the fashion of ancient *Tapovans*—forest schools about which he had read so much in the *Upanishads*.
3. It should give spiritual training to the students.
4. It should help the children in cultivation of love of nature and sympathy with all living creatures.
5. It should educate children by providing an atmosphere of freedom.
6. It should educate children by making them alive to their natural surroundings.
7. It should educate children by providing an environment of living aspiration, based upon living contact between the teacher and the taught.
8. It should impart knowledge to children through mother tongue.
9. The school should provide for manual labour.
10. It should provide for close personal contact with the teacher. The number of students in classes should be very small.
11. There should be a well-equipped library.
12. It should be a community school where there is no distinction of caste and creed.
13. It should teach crafts like sewing, book-binding, weaving, carpentry etc.
14. It should include drawing, art and music as an integral part of the curriculum.
15. It should provide students adequate opportunities for choosing their hobbies and occupations.
16. It should be a self-governing institution with a dairy farm, post office, hospital and workshop. Students should hold their own courts.

3. *Tagore's Concept of Discipline*: For Tagore, an educational institution is "an open house in which students and teachers are one. They must live their compact life together". He observes that an educational institution "must not be a dead cage in which living minds are fed with food artificially prepared". He further remarks that "students are not dancing monkeys or bears". About the discipline of the educational institution he founded, he states, "I never said to them: Don't do this, or don't do that. The boys were encouraged to manage their own affairs".

4. *Curriculum*: Tagore was for a comprehensive curriculum which should satisfy child's aesthetic, creative, spiritual and vocational needs. In his experimental school at Shantiniketan, Science (especially the experimental science) was taught to children in various classes. Shantiniketan school had a very well-equipped laboratory for performing experiments whereas in other schools, people had not even thought of this subject. Nature-study was also taught here, right in the midst of nature.

*Methods of Teaching*: Tagore strongly criticised the bookish and examination-oriented teaching. He stressed movement of the whole body in various learning activities. He followed the activity principle, and advocated constructive and creative activities. He believed that there should be daily practice by the pupils in expressing immediately what they are learning. The central point in educational activity according to Tagore, is joy which should pervade all types of activities; "Work should be wedded to joy". Tagore also emphasised the principle of curiosity and interest, and the spirit of play. He advocated fullness of experience-physical, mental, aesthetic and emotional. All this truly accords with the modern pedagogy.

5. *Role of the Teacher*: Tagore laid great emphasis on the attitude of the teacher. He wrote, "I have found that little children learn more quickly the attitude of the teacher than the knowledge imparted by him".

Tagore felt, "Most teachers do not know that in order to teach boys they have to be boys. Unfortunately, schoolmasters are obsessed with the consciousness of their dignity as grown up persons and as learned men, and therefore they always try to burden the children with their grown up manners and their learned manners, and that hurts the mind of the students unnecessarily". His concept of a good teacher is stated in these words, "A teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself. A lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to burn its own flame. The teacher who has come to the end of his subject, who has no living traffic with his knowledge, but merely repeats his lesson to his students, can only load their minds; he cannot quicken them. Truth not only must inform but also inspire".

### Visvabharati at Shantiniketan in Natural Surroundings

Rabindranath Tagore was not a dreamer. He was a great educational practitioner who himself was closely associated with the entire educational practices at Visvabharati.

Rabindranath Tagore

The word *Visvabharti* is composed of two words. In Sanskrit, the word *Visva* means 'world' and *bharti* means 'culture'. Thus *Visvabharti* would mean 'world culture'. The motto of this University is *Yatra Visvam bhavati ekamidam*, i.e., where the world meets in one place. Through the *Visvabharti* as a whole, the poet and the seer sought "to establish a relationship between East and West, to promote inter-cultural and inter-social amity and understanding and fulfill the highest mission of the present age—the unification of mankind".

The *Visvabharti* was formally founded on 22nd December 1921. But it was not a new institution. It had grown gradually out of the Shantiniketan Ashrama. Today this *Visvabharti* is known not only all over the world, but also attracts scholars from different parts of the world.

Tagore has observed, "I have formed the nucleus of an International University, as one of the best means of promoting mutual understanding between the East and the West". It was intended to be, "Treasure of Light" not only for India but also for the world.

Tagore wanted to extend by degrees the scope of this university on simple lines, until it comprehended the whole range of eastern culture—the Aryan, Semitic, Mongolian etc. Its object was to reveal the eastern mind to the world.

*Main features of Visvabharati:* Tagore describes these as:

1. The institution that bore the name of *Visvabharati* was founded with the call that man had to be set free not only in the field of Nature but also among mankind.
2. The greatest distinction of our school is the direct and immediate emotional contact of pupils with their teachers and with external nature.
3. A speciality of our institution is that it wants to bring up our pupils in inseparable association with Nature.
4. It wants to hold before the world the ideal of the universality of man.
5. It is intended not only to be the intellectual centre of the intellectual life of India but also the centre of her economic life.
6. It is envisaged to be the nucleus of an international university and as one of the means of promoting mutual understanding between the East and the West.

### Natural Environment at Shantiniketan

Education is imparted in the lap of natural surroundings. The influence of green trees, open fields, seasonal skies, songs and chirpings of birds and other natural phenomena, fills the pupils' mind with spiritual elevation. Tagore himself says, "Having in my mind the ideal of a school, which should be a home and a temple in one, where teaching should be a part of worshipful life. I selected this spot far away from all distraction of the town,

hallowed by the memory of a pious life, whose days were passed here in communion with God”.

### Institutions at *Visvabharti*

Following institutions were started to carry out his experiments in education:

1. *Sisu Bhavan* (Nursery School)
  2. *Path Bhavan* (School Section—Matriculation Examination)
  3. *Siksha Bhavan* (Higher Secondary)
  4. *Vidya Bhavan* (College of Undergraduate and Post-Graduate Studies and Research)
  5. *Vinya Bhavan* (College of Teaching)
  6. *Kala Bhavan* (College of Fine Arts and Crafts)
  7. *Sangit Bhavan* (College of Dance)
  8. *Sriniketan* (Department of Rural Reconstruction)
  9. *Siksa Satra* (Rural High School)
  10. *Silpa Sadana* (College of Industrial Training)
  11. *Cheena Bhavan* (School of Languages, e.g., Chinese, Tibetan, etc.)
- By and large, all formed part of *Visvabharti University*

### Tagore's Contribution to Education

Tagore's concept of education and its practices balance the claims of different schools of educational philosophy, *i.e.*, humanism, idealism, naturalism, pragmatism, realism and supernaturalism. His philosophy is a true blend of the Eastern and Western philosophy.

The *Visvabharti* is the embodiment of his educational ideals.

Tagore is one of the very few educational philosophers whose philosophy is the outcome of his educational experiments. Simultaneously, he gave a practical shape to his ideology.

Rabindranath was a great educational practitioner. He was not a dreamer only to leave behind a legacy of the principles of life. He worked them out in a constructive way.

Setting up educational institutions in natural surroundings and the environment of freedom from fear—the two principal features of his theory and practice of education bear the mark of his naturalism.