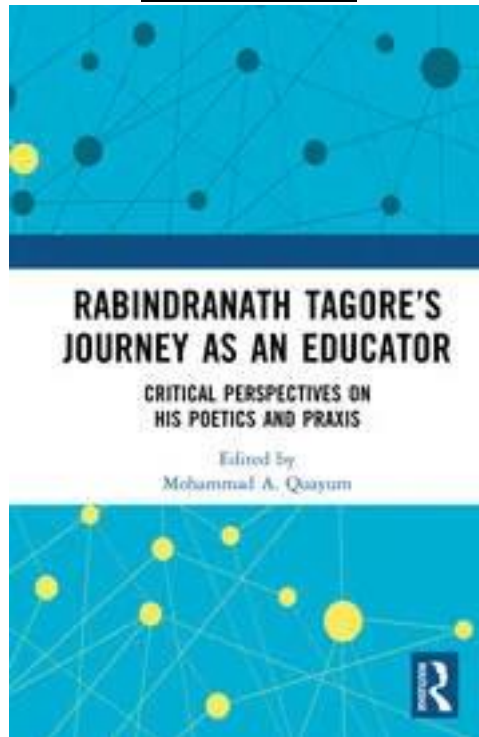


Mohammad A. Quayum (Ed.). 2022. *Rabindranath Tagore's Journey as an Educator: Critical Perspectives on His Poetics and Praxis*. London & New York: Routledge, 314 pp. ISBN: 978-0-367-69500-2

BOOK REVIEW



This book looks at Rabindranath Tagore's experiments and journey as an educator and the influence of humanistic worldviews, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism on his philosophy of education. He wanted to overcome the problems of colonial education but instead focused on creating an indigenous model of education for India. It juxtaposes the educational systems and institutions set up by the British colonial administration with Tagore's pedagogical vision and schools in Santiniketan, West Bengal – Brahmacharya Ashram (1901), Visva-Bharati University (1921), and Sriniketan Institute of Village Reconstruction (1922). Tagore modelled his first school after the forest hermitage of the Vedic period. The austere atmosphere of the school was more like a monastery than a regular school for children. His educational vision helps to heal our differences through the inculcation of the spirit of empathy, sympathy, and sacrifice in every individual and also teaches us to love nature. According to Tagore, there

were four reasons for setting up his school – a) lack of freedom for children, b) authoritarian attitude of teachers, c) excessive rote learning at the expense of creativity and imagination, and d) emphasis on worldly success rather than inner attainment. An educational pioneer and a poet-teacher, Tagore combined nature and culture, tradition, and modernity, East and West, in formulating his educational methodology. The core principles of his educational ideas and experiments can be summed up into four headings and these four principles are all interconnected and overlap. They are (i) freedom, (ii) love of nature, (iii) search for global unity, (iv) and fostering imagination and creativity. Later, he changed his worldview to a certain extent and inculcated ideas from all around the world naming the motto of Visva-Bharati with a Sanskrit *shloka* meaning “where the world makes its home in a single nest.” He made a dedicated effort to decolonise the Indian education system and create an indigenous paradigm that would extend India to its Asian neighbours and the rest of the world. He enthusiastically supported the incorporation of Western liberal ideas in the Indian educational system. Here one is also reminded of Tagore’s remark to Gandhi, stating: “Visva-Bharati is like a vessel which is carrying the cargo of my life’s best treasure.” The fourteen essays in this volume analyse the relevance of Tagore’s theories and practice in encouraging greater cultural exchange and the dissolution of the walls between classrooms and communities.

This anthology is divided into two parts. Apart from the detailed Introduction by the editor, the first part comprises of four essays where scholars compare Tagore with four selected modern educationists. Narasingha P. Sil compares Rabindranath Tagore with Rousseau, both of whom believed that nature was the best teacher. He argues that despite their sociocultural and temporal differences, Rousseau and Tagore shared remarkable similarities in their educational vision. Both were humane and humanitarian educators who championed moral education and education for the individual’s holistic development. In Chapter 2, the focus changes from the French Enlightenment philosopher to the nineteenth-century British socialist writer and activist, who was also associated with the British Arts and Crafts Movement, William Morris. Christine Marsh maintains that both Tagore and Morris deplored conventional education as it often “crushed” the child. Instead, they favoured the child’s personal freedom and freedom of choice.

In the next two chapters we move to a comparison between Tagore and two Bengali contemporaries, Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) and Begum Rokeya (1880–1932). Goutam Ghosal elucidates the similarities and differences in the educational outlook of two “poet-educators,” Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, who were inherently moral and spiritual in their worldview. However, unlike Tagore, who vociferously renounced and denounced nationalism in much of his later

writings, Sri Aurobindo was a revolutionary nationalist. Both believed in “education of fullness” and in the purification of consciousness as the primary goal of education. In Chapter 4, Mohammad A. Quayum engages in a comparative study of the educational ideas and practices of two pioneering Bengali educators, who were both self-taught but helped to alter the educational landscape of British India in significant ways. Tagore began his journey in 1901, while Rokeya embarked on hers in 1910; both began in a religious spirit but gradually became inclusive and multifaith in their approach.

The remaining ten essays in Part II analyse “Tagore’s Educational Ideas and Experiments: Diverse Perspectives.” Tagore began his school project when he was forty years old, exactly at the midpoint of his life. But even before that, his ideas about educational matters found expression in his essays, letters, lectures, poetry, plays, fiction, and short stories. Thus, we find the different scholars who have penned the ten essays in this section often referring to and repeating several of Tagore’s writings in their analyses. These include memoirs like *Jeevansmriti* (My Reminiscences), *Amar Chhelebela* (My Boyhood Days); essays like “Shikkha Samasya,” “Shikkhar Her-Fer,” “Shikkhabidhi,” “Tapoban,” “Creative Unity”; short stories like “Tota Kahini” (The Parrot’s Tale), “Chhuti,” and “Report.” In his essay on “Education for Tomorrow,” Mohammad A. Quayum analyses why the three institutions established by Tagore are still relevant for the world of today and tomorrow and why they should be considered when designing any educational model of the future. Debarati Bandyopadhyay explains in detail how we find the entwining of the practical with the philosophical aspect in Tagore’s educational philosophy. She brings together Tagore’s childhood experiences from both home and school to define the essential aspects of his educational principles and quotes extensively from his fiction and non-fiction to establish her point of view. According to Shamsad Mortuza, for someone who had little or no regard for institutional schooling, Rabindranath Tagore’s efforts to establish three educational institutions might seem paradoxical. He thereby developed an ecology of education that can be recognised as an indigenous albeit ingenious type of liberal arts that prepare students with the lived experience to brace against the merely practical, material, and visible world. Mortuza also opines that Tagore’s ideas are finding currency in a changing world where liberal arts have suddenly become the basis of education in this era of Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Md. Rezaul Haque investigates Tagore’s potential contribution as well as relevance to imagining an environmentally sustainable, eco-friendly, “green” university. How would Tagore’s idea of a green university, best represented by Visva-Bharati, both in setting and spirit, compare with the concept of a green

university that is in vogue now? He opines that in Tagore's green university where nature plays a significant role, the proper function of education is not to be measured by its market value, not to produce graduates for the job market, but to inspire them to strive for, practice and admit the greatness of the inner self. All the faculties of the learner are developed simultaneously – physical, imaginative, intellectual, social, spiritual, and so on. Anindya Bhattacharya reiterates how Tagore abhorred the imperial education system and recognised that colonial pedagogy was creating a rift between the Western knowledge acquired by the colonised subjects and their social imaginary. Ana Jelnikar explores the rationale behind Tagore's travels which can be directly linked to his ideas and ideals of education. She argues how Tagore's globetrotting, his travelling across the world twelve times and spending a tenth of his lengthy life, close to nine years, on the road, shaped his universalist vision and the cosmopolitan outlook he adopted for his university, Visva-Bharati.

In an interesting essay on Tagore's world of children's literature and his philosophy of education, Dipankar Roy explores Tagore's career as a writer of children's literature and his changing views of children's literature as part of his educational curriculum. Roy argues that these two areas of Tagore's activities have not been discussed synchronously before. He points out that during the first decade of the twentieth century, we find Tagore's schema about the quintessence of childhood and the kind of literature most suitable for its organic development. This schema reflects the Rousseauistic, liberal-humanist, and romantic idea of the child as a part of nature. Tagore wanted to establish a just and holistic form of education system for children but none of the texts could be categorised as "works meant only for children" to teach them lessons in morality. Roy further describes a chronotopic transformation in Tagore's corpus – from the early years with the predominance of historical narratives, fairy tales and plays celebrating seasonal festivals at Santiniketan, and stories based on contemporary reality, and he then gradually moved to modes like fantasy and nonsense. Since Tagore was keen to push the boundaries of children's literature both generically and thematically, his works are therefore *sui generis*.

The last three essays written by foreign scholars try to analyse Tagore's role as an educator in different ways. According to Matthew Pritchard, Tagore's writings and praxis show his concern that music and the emotional vitality it represented should be rescued from the sidelines of a "modernized" society. There should be a new spirit of expansiveness, combining social sympathy with artistic enterprise. He elaborates how Tagore's own idea of the "surplus" serves as a key step in the rejuvenation of Romantic, philosophical, and aesthetic concerns in the twentieth century. According to William Radice, Tagore the "poet-teacher" can be understood in two ways: as a poet who was always a teacher or as a teacher who was also a poet. The latter interpretation is more

interesting and, in a way, more disturbing. Radice analyses *Yogajog* and *Muktadhara* as a poet's work. Kathleen M. O'Connell's research and publication on Tagore as an educator is well-known. In the last essay of this volume, she writes about "Educational Takeaways from Tagore's Drama *Achalayatan*." According to her, *Achalayatan* represents a metaphor for any institution or idea that becomes fixated or reified in time and loses touch with the living reality surrounding it. Just as the dramatic resolution in *Achalayatan* resulted in an opening up to the fluidity and spontaneity of nature, similarly Santiniketan became a paradigm for joyous learning in nature that became a model for reform in other educational institutions.

This anthology of essays on Rabindranath Tagore is the third book edited by Mohammad A. Quayum on the polymath. Quayum should be congratulated for bringing together an international group of scholars to contribute on this perspective of the poet as an educator. The book will be useful for scholars and researchers of education, Tagore studies, literature, cultural studies, sociology of education, South Asian studies, and colonial and postcolonial studies. As all of us rightly agree, indeed there is no end to Tagore.

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