

## Tagore and Education: Creativity, Mutuality and Survival<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This essay examines some of the seminal experiences of Rabindranath's life that informed his educational vision and helped shape his educational priorities at Santiniketan. In particular it will explore three central themes that can be said to characterise the essence of his educational experiment. These themes – creativity, mutuality and survival – which help define his “Education for Creative Unity,” can be said to be the guiding principles for an educational paradigm that he hoped to establish for his own time and as a model for the future. The final section of the essay explores Tagore's early concerns as an environmentalist through a 1922 fable that he wrote concerning human greed and the role of technology in outstripping the planet.

### Keywords

Santiniketan, creativity, mutuality, survival, multiculturalism, environmentalism

Rabindranath's educational experiment at Santiniketan, which he likened to a vessel carrying the cargo of his “life's best treasure” (Letter to Gandhi) was a central focus throughout his mature life. He spent forty years of his life developing a mode of education which facilitated the opening up of a child's unique creative personality in a setting harmonious with its immediate environment and the wider world. With his far-reaching vision, Rabindranath foresaw the coming of the global village and the need to educate children in a way that roots them in their own cultural history, yet enables them to personally identify with other races and cultures, as well as the different strata within a given society. Today, his consideration of the consolidation of cultures has a new relevance in international cities as immigration brings multiple cultures

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even closer together within a neighbourhood setting, making the need for an educational model that promotes inter-cultural understanding and new combinations of cultural components more compelling.

This essay, rather than concentrating on the history of Santiniketan, will take a broader approach and look first at some of the experiences which helped shape Rabindranath's educational vision, and at three themes, which I believe form the foundation for his educational priorities and characterise their essence. These themes – creativity, mutuality and survival – which help define his “Education for Creative Unity,” can be said to be the guiding principles for an educational paradigm which he hoped to establish for his own time and as a model for the future.

### **Creativity**

Rabindranath has written about the negative effects of his formal schooling, which he describes as out of touch with Indian culture, mechanical, deadening of creativity and restraining of individual freedom. He has also written about the positive experience of “subconscious learning” which he experienced in Jorasanko, the family mansion, where the members of his joint family provided a rich cultural and artistic experience. Also, there were the experiences on the family estates in East Bengal, where he encountered rural life for the first time, responding initially in a poetic fashion to the landscape and changing seasons, then compassionately to the great suffering of the villagers as he became aware of the enormous obstacles they faced. These experiences were important factors in his creation of a school at Santiniketan, which emphasised the arts and cultural sharing, a poetic appreciation of nature, and an awareness of the suffering of others.

At a psychological level, he also writes of three experiences which profoundly influenced his life and helped shape his inner vision regarding the ideal of creative unity in education and other areas of life. There was the early experience when he was learning to read, and disconnected words suddenly came together as he encountered the rhyming phrase “*jal parey/pata narey*” (the water falls/the leaf trembles) in his spelling book. The rhythm of the words connected him for the first time with a harmonious creative dimension. “I was no longer a mere student with his mind muffled by spelling lessons,” he writes. “The rhythmic picture of the tremulous leaves beaten by the rain opened before my mind the world which does not merely carry information, but a harmony with my being. The unmeaning fragments lost their individual isolation and my mind revelled in the unity of a vision” (“The Vision” 95).

Then there was the intense and definitive experience which occurred at age eighteen as he stood on a balcony in Calcutta watching an early morning sunrise: “The invisible screen of the commonplace was removed from all things and all men,” he writes, “and their ultimate significance was intensified in my

mind.... That which was memorable in this experience was its human message, the sudden expansion of my consciousness in the super-personal world of man” (“The Vision” 94-95; O’Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore* 105-25). This experience was followed by an unprecedented outpouring of creative energy, which affected him throughout his life, and which, according to his self-narrative, provided the experiential base for his concept of a unity that penetrates all existence. As he noted to C.F. Andrews: “The whole scene was one perfect music – one marvellous rhythm.... Everyone, even those who bored me, seemed to lose their outer barrier of personality; and I was full of gladness, full of love, for every person and every tiniest thing.... That morning in Free School Lane was one of the first things which gave me the inner vision, and I have tried to explain it in my poems. I have felt, ever since, that this was my goal: to express the fullness of life, in its beauty, as perfection – if only the veil were withdrawn” (*Letters to a Friend* 24).

A third transforming experience occurred when he was in his early forties and managing the family estates in East Bengal. By his description, it was an ordinary day when he had finished his morning work and stood at the window watching the first spring flood fill the channel of a dry river bed: “The feeling which I had,” he wrote, “was like that which a man, groping through a fog without knowing his destination, might feel when he suddenly discovers that he stands before his own house.... All things that had seemed like vagrant waves were revealed to my mind in relation to a boundless sea” (*Religion of Man* 94-96). The sense of fragmentation, isolation and dislocation he had been experiencing was transformed into a “luminous unity of truth.”

These three experiences instilled in him a feeling of intimate spiritual connection between all beings. In the first, there was a realisation of the power of words and poetry to connect his consciousness to the outside world, validating the role of art as a vehicle for transcendence and integration. The experience on Free School Street, at age eighteen, involved an expansion of consciousness which broke his sense of isolation and connected him to the larger world of humanity. The Shelaidah experience involved a perception of a consciousness behind the unfolding of the physical universe, a consciousness that sought the expansion of human creativity and cooperation. Together, the three experiences, all of which were triggered by natural phenomena, provided a poetic and experiential foundation for his educational ideas. As he writes in *The Religion of Man*:

I have expressed my belief that the first stage of my realization was through my feeling of intimacy with Nature – not that Nature which has its channel of information for our mind and physical relationship with our living body, but that which satisfies our personality with manifestations that make our life rich and stimulate our imagination in their harmony of forms, colours, sounds and movements. It is not that world which vanishes into abstract

symbols behind its own testimony to Science, but that which lavishly displays its wealth of reality to our personal self having its own perpetual reaction upon our human nature. (18)

Drawing from these experiences, Rabindranath, as Gurudev, argued that education should seek to develop sensitivity in a child through a direct experience of nature when her/his consciousness is at its freshest level. He recognised early childhood as the most critical time for developing empathy and the ability to connect with one's surroundings. As he wrote:

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. (*Personality* 116-17)

In this regard, Rabindranath felt classical Indian culture in its harmonious relationship to nature had much to offer as an educational model. As he saw it, the stream of Indian civilisation, which developed into a syncretic, non-violent society, evolved within the essentially benign environment of the forest, where physical barriers were minimal and a connectedness with nature was assumed. As a result, a “monistic” position and spirit of reconciliation developed which sought union with all aspects of the universe.”

India's relation to nature – “in which individuals found no barrier between their lives and the Grand life that permeates the Universe” – is juxtaposed with that of the European Norsemen who found nature a threat and barrier. He suggests the stream of Western civilisation which developed into a technological society evolved within an essentially hostile natural environment – i.e., within deserts and vis-a-vis dangerous waters. As a consequence, protective urban centres were constructed and a consciousness developed – alienated from nature – encouraging a mentality of control over nature, competition, and an emphasis upon a “dualistic” approach to truth which stressed the conflict between good and evil, and separation from the outside world.

In his essays “Siksa Samasya,” “Tapaban,” and “The Religion of the

Forest,” Rabindranath suggests using the Tapaban, or forest hermitage as an educational model, with its organic connections to India’s history and society. He explores the symbolism of the forest, as used in such classical texts as the Ramayana and Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* in its representation of purification, reconciliation and conflict resolution. He finds the distinctive quality of Indian civilisation which is manifested through the symbolism of the forest as tranquillity or *santa-rasa*. The hermitage is presented as the place where the chasm between man and creation is bridged, and where nature imparts the peace of the eternal to human emotions.<sup>3</sup>

Educationally, he distinguishes the need for various levels of education: education of the senses (*indriyer siksa*) and education of the intellect (*jnaner siksa*). Then he adds “cultivation of feeling” (*bodher tapasya/sadhana*) which involves an expansion of sympathy in kinship with all existence. “According to the true Indian view,” he writes:

... our consciousness of the world, merely as the sum total of things that exist, and as governed by laws, is imperfect. But it is perfect when our consciousness realises all things as spiritually one with it, and therefore capable of giving us joy. For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realising our own selves in it through expansion of sympathy; not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with our selves in perfect union. (“The Religion of the Forest” 48-49)

Today, it is no longer fashionable to speak in terms of Eastern spirituality and Western materialism, but what is important here is Rabindranath’s awareness of different levels of consciousness and the need for an educational system that accommodates and provides a balance between them. For Rabindranath, one of the great challenges of the modern age was to reconcile the spirit of conquest and the spirit of harmony. “Can it be true that they shall never be reconciled?” he asked. “If so, can ever the age of peace and co-operation dawn upon the human world? Creation is the harmony of contrary forces – the forces of attraction and repulsion.... When there is only one of them triumphant and the other defeated, then either there is the death of cold rigidity or that of suicidal explosion” (“The Religion of the Forest” 64-65).

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<sup>3</sup> In literature also Tagore finds different approaches to nature between Kalidasa and Shakespeare. Tagore finds that in such plays as *Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, the malignant forces of nature are emphasised, while in *The Tempest*, man struggles with nature and longs to sever connection. He writes: “I hope it is needless for me to say that these observations of mine are not for criticising Shakespeare’s great power as a dramatic poet, but to show in his works the gulf between nature and human nature owing to the tradition of his race and time. It cannot be said that beauty of nature is ignored in his writings; only he fails to recognise in them the truth of the interpenetration of human life and the cosmic life of the world” (“The Religion of the Forest” 59-61).

We find Tagore's ideas concerning multifaceted intelligence, subconscious learning and the need to educate the affective side of the personality are supported in contemporary writing by such books as Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind; The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, which delineates various kinds of intelligence such as verbal, mathematical-logical, spatial, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal and intrapsychic. Gardner, like Tagore, argues for a holistic learning environment within which children can achieve mastery of skills in a pleasurable manner suited to their own natural progression. He advises educators to "pay close heed to the biological and psychological proclivities of human beings and to the particular historical and cultural context of the locales where they live" (Gardner 393).

Supporting Gardner's work is a book by Harvard psychologist, Daniel Goleman, entitled *Emotional Intelligence*. Goleman focusses on the inadequacy of the IQ model to measure overall intelligence and predict successful performance in life. He argues that emotional intelligence is equally as important as mathematical-logical intelligence and that an educational system which does not aim at harmonising thought and emotions is responsible for many problems, such as violence, eating disorders, depression, physical illness and failure in life (Goleman 90-91). We also find support for Rabindranth's concept of consciousness and his objections regarding scientific reductionism in the writings and research of psychologist Stanislav Grof. Prof. Grof indicates that his own research over the last few decades, and that which has been done on contemporary consciousness research in general, challenges the principles of Newtonian physics and "radically changes our conception of the human psyche":

It shows that, in its farthest reaches, the psyche of each of us is essentially commensurate with all of existence and ultimately identical with the cosmic creative principle itself. This conclusion, while seriously challenging the world view of modern technological societies, is in far-reaching agreement with the image of reality found in the great spiritual and mystical traditions of the world which the Anglo-American writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley referred to as the 'perennial philosophy'. (Grof 3)

In Tagore's scheme, the arts are given high priority in the curriculum as a means to enhance a child's imagination and to integrate various aspects of the personality. The more academic and cognitively oriented subjects are to be added progressively as the child advances. "In the world of art," he wrote:

our consciousness being freed from the tangle of self interest, we gain an unobstructed vision of unity, the incarnation of the real which is a joy for ever. As in the world of art, so in the spiritual world, our soul waits for its freedom from the ego to reach that disinterested joy which is the source

and goal of creation. It cries for its mukti, its freedom in the unity of truth.  
(*Religion of Man* 184)

Rational training through books – and he would no doubt include computers in this category if he were writing today – should be secondary to direct experience. As he wrote:

Have not our books, like most of our necessities, come between us and our world? We have got into the habit of covering the windows of our minds with their pages, and plasters of book phrases have stuck into our mental skin, making it impervious to all direct touches of truth.... At any rate during the early period of education, children should come to their lesson of truths through natural processes – directly through persons and things.  
(*Personality* 142-43)

Rabindranath was concerned about the environment from early on, and began creating ceremonies to celebrate nature and create ecological awareness. One such ceremony, “Briksha Ropana,” a part of the Rain Festival, was introduced in 1928. In the course of the ceremony, Rabindranath planted trees and encouraged the children each to adopt a tree. It was in his words, “A ceremony of the replenishing of the treasury of the mother by her spendthrift children” (qtd. in Mukherjee 235). In the villages, he celebrated the harvest cycle with Hala-karshana, a festival celebrating the cultivation of the land, and a Harvest Ceremony, the “Nabanna,” which welcomed the new rice crop.

### **Mutuality**

“What is the truth of the world?” asked Tagore. “Its truth is not the mass of materials, but their universal relatedness. A drop of water is not a particular assortment of elements, it is their mutuality” (Tagore, “Construction versus Creation” 61). Tagore argued that the principle by which India will realise herself is neither commercialism, nor nationalism but universalism. Today the universalist ideas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, like the notions of East and West, which were influential during Rabindranath’s lifetime, have been challenged. But as Bimal Matilal writes:

It is true that the dream of the nineteenth century thinkers of a harmonious universe was wrongly argued and hence false. But we should not forget that the survival of human societies is still based upon the belief in a basic universal moral fabric, without which everything will fall apart. This is also a sort of universalism – the sort which Tagore projected through his poems and other writings. Hence in today’s pluralistic world, consisting of various races, nations, and political and social systems, Tagore’s work has a special relevance. (“Foreword” 9)

Tagore's universalism was obviously not the banding together of individuals through telecommunications for the purpose of financial markets or nationalistic concerns. He made an important distinction between construction and creation in his essay "Construction versus Creation," stating that "construction" is that which is fuelled by our wants, but "creation" expresses our being. He did not deny the validity and necessity of the economic dimension. In fact, he was constantly reminded of it as he struggled to sustain his school at Santiniketan. What he objected to was the privileging of the economic as the most important factor in our existence. He argued that economic priorities – like those of aggressive nationalism – represented "construction," that is goals which might unite individuals for a period to fulfil certain wants, but in the end would become divisive and bring strife since they lacked a creative ideal to unite and sustain them. The mentality of "Construction" could be used to bring various elements together in a mechanical way, but what is needed is the spiritual realisation of some great truth of relationship to save human societies from constant conflict of interest and friction of pride. Proximity, without a unifying ideal and mutual goals, meant functioning as a crowd of alienated individuals rather than a related group (Tagore, "Construction Versus Creation" 75). Kabir, Chaitanya, the Buddha and Rammohun Roy are cited elsewhere in Tagore's writings as examples of creative thinkers whose ideas have been able to unite diverse individuals in the past in friendship and cooperation, rather than conflict.

Educationally, Rabindranath repeated his concerns for a process that was in touch with nature and sought full expansion of the personality through the arts and by cultivating social and cultural collaboration. The meeting-ground of cultures, as he envisioned it at Visva-Bharati, should be a learning centre where conflicting interests are minimized, where individuals work together in a common pursuit of truth 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" ("An Eastern University" 171-72).

To encourage mutuality, Rabindranath invited artists and scholars from other parts of India and the world to live together at Santiniketan on a daily basis to share their cultures with the Visva-Bharati. The Constitution designated Visva-Bharati as an Indian, Eastern and Global cultural centre whose goals were:

- a) To study the mind of Man in its realisation of different aspects of truth from diverse points of view.
- b) To bring into more intimate relation with one another through patient study and research, the different cultures of the East on the basis of their underlying unity.



- c) To approach the West from the standpoint of such a unity of the life and thought of Asia.
- d) To seek to realise in a common fellowship of study the meeting of East and West and thus ultimately to strengthen the fundamental conditions of world peace through the free communication of ideas between the two hemispheres.
- e) And with such Ideals in view to provide at Santiniketan a centre of culture where research into the study of the religion, literature, history, science and art of Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian, Islamic, Sikh, Christian and other civilizations may be pursued along with the culture of the West, with that simplicity of externals which is necessary for true spiritual realisation, in amity, good-fellowship and co-operation between the thinkers and scholars of both Eastern and Western countries, free from all antagonisms of race, nationality, creed or caste and in the name of the One Supreme Being who is Shantam, Shivam, Advaitam. (*First Visva-Bharati Prospectus*, 1922)

In terms of curriculum, he advocated a different emphasis in teaching. Rather than studying national cultures for the wars won and cultural dominance imposed, he would have advocated a teaching system that analysed history and culture for the progress that had been made in breaking down social and religious barriers. Such an approach would emphasise the innovations that had been made in integrating individuals of diverse backgrounds into a larger framework, and in devising the economic policies which emphasised social justice and narrowed the gap between rich and poor. Art would be studied for its role in furthering the aesthetic imagination and expressing universal themes.

It should be noted that Rabindranath in his own person was a living icon of the type of mutuality and creative exchange that he advocated. His vision of culture was not a static one, but one that advocated new cultural fusions, and he fought for a world where multiple voices were encouraged to interact with one another and to reconcile differences within an overriding commitment to peace and mutual interconnectedness. His generous personality and his striving to break down barriers of all sorts gives us a model for the way multiculturalism can exist within a single human personality, and the type of individual which the educational process should be aspiring towards.

### **Survival**

Another constant in Tagore's educational concerns is the theme of survival, coalescing around care of the natural environment and preservation of cultural and political diversity. He feared that the ruthless utilitarian aspect of western culture would encompass all others with its uncontrolled speed, overconsumption and overcomplexification. In 1922, he wrote a fable about the role of technology in outstripping the resources of the planet, which seems eerily prescient in light of today's ecological reports. The setting for the story is

on the moon, which, by his account, had been populated in the past replete with colour, music, movement and an abundance of food. In time, though, a new race, gifted with great energy and intelligence began greedily consuming the surroundings. These beings, fuelled by great energy – and supported by intelligence and imagination – failed to realise that material acquisitiveness does not bring happiness, or that increased speed does not necessarily constitute progress:

Through machinery of great power, the race made such an addition to their natural capacity for gathering and holding, that their career of plunder entirely outstripped nature's power for recuperation. The profit makers dug big holes in the stored capital of the planet. They created wants that were unnatural and provision for these wants was forcibly extracted from nature. When they had reduced the limited store of material in their immediate surroundings, they proceed to wage wars among their different sectors, each wanting the lion's share. They laughed at moral law and took it to be a sign of superiority to be ruthless in the satisfaction of their own desire.

Finally, they exhausted the water, cut down all the trees and reduced the surface of the planet to a desert, riddled with great pits. Until finally, the moon, like a fruit whose pulp has been completely eaten by the insects which it has sheltered, became a hollow shell... a universal grave for the voracious creatures who insisted upon consuming the world into which they had been born. (Tagore, "The Robbery of the Soil" 38-39)

It is likely that Rabindranath, were he living today, would be at the forefront of those trying to save our fragile ecosystem. He would also be writing about the urgency of promoting the educational priorities of creativity, mutuality and survival in our schools. Concerning the environment and the role of science in today's world, one feels that Tagore – were he writing today – would express much the same sentiments as Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki, when he says: "Education to prepare students for a high-tech future and competition in a global economy misses the fact that we are completely dependent for survival and the quality of our lives on the integrity of the planetary biosphere that we seem intent on destroying" (168-69; O'Connell, "Sikshar Herpher" 65-81).

Rabindranath would also, perhaps, reiterate the words he delivered in 1938, when he accepted his honorary degree from Oxford, saying:

In an era of mounting anguish and vanishing worth, when disaster is fast overtaking countries and continents, with savagery let loose and brutal thirst for possession augmented by science, it may sound merely poetic to speak of an emergency principle of world-wide relationship....

But times' violence, however immediately threatening, is circumscribed, and we who live beyond it and dwell also in the larger reality of Time, must

renew our faith in the permanent growth of civilization towards an ultimate purpose. (qtd. in Dutta & Robinson 353)

In conclusion, if we pose the question, "Does Rabindranath's educational vision have relevance for the new generation?" The answer must be an emphatic yes. In fact, as other contemporary educators and thinkers, who share Rabindranath's concerns for developing a form of education which goes beyond the fragmentary and disconnected approach to learning which characterises today's curriculum, would argue: it is only through an educational system that opens the doors of creative consciousness, mutuality and direct contact with our ecosystem, that a future millennium will be possible.

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