

## **Rabindranath Tagore's Philosophy of Education and Development in India**

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### **Abstract**

Tagore envisioned an education system aimed at promoting international cooperation and creating global citizens. Tagore realised that the main obstacle in the path of India's progress is lack of education. The humanist and naturalist in Tagore actuate his ideals of wholistic development of man for a new, awakened and progressive India. This essay is therefore an attempt to understand the philosophical groundings of the journey of the universal man that Tagore aspires for through education and development. While there is a unique sensitisation in Tagore's educational model for education within multi-cultural and multi-lingual situations, yet the contemporary challenges for excellence in education often makes it a spiritual thesis.

**Keywords:** Integral Development, Mental Development, Physical Development

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Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of education finds its origin in his own life experiences. Tagore was born in the most reputed and enlightened family of Bengal, whose progressive reformist zeal, inspired by western culture, combined by the enthusiasm for a liberal nationalistic revival of the Indian Renaissance revolutionised the Indian society and the education system in India. The experiences during his formative years of life, to a great extent, form the foundation of his thoughts and philosophies.

Tagore realised that the main obstacle in the path of India's progress is the lack of education. The prevalent colonial education system of that era was designed to produce loyalists to the British government, Indian in blood and colour but British in thoughts, beliefs and opinions. The education offered through this system was neither modern i.e. at par with the developments in the western countries, nor was it relevant to the Indian context. Moreover, the medium of instruction was English which alienated the masses, dividing the Indian people

into two classes, the privileged English speaking class who received education and the masses that did not.

In 1901, when Rabindranath Tagore lay the foundation of the Ashram School at Santiniketan, his sole purpose was to construct a nation system of education for India based on the ancient Indian forest schooling system. He believed that the forest school is a model for a typical Indian system of education comprising of the three basic elements of non- duality, friendship and fulfilment of one's duties; and integrated it with *Sadhana* (*disciplining one's senses and one's own life*). However, he modernised this model by bringing in science and other modern attitudes.

### **Tagore's Philosophy of Education**

In his thoughts and philosophy, Rabindranath Tagore visualises that the ultimate reality is the Universal Man, which is not a concept but a journey which every individual has to tread upon in order to realise God. For him god is the universal man. While explaining the meaning of the Universal Man, he says that this personality which is the conscious principle of oneness, the centre of relationships, is the reality, therefore, the ultimate object of attainment. I must emphasise this fact, that this world is a real world only in relation to a central personality. When the centre is taken away, then it falls to pieces, become a heap of abstractions. For him man is the cosmic vision of divine.

Tagore is referred to as a *humanist* since his philosophies are centred around man. According to him, the ideal education system is one that aims at man's perfection, meaning the development of all the aspects of a human personality, physical, intellectual and spiritual. This is the ultimate aim of education. He believes that nature is the best educator and man learns through his own experiences from the nature. For him nature, man and god can never be visualised in isolation from one another, they exist in harmony. God has created nature and if you are in sync with nature you are in sync with god. Education develops the faith in the universal soul and leads to the realisation of the Universal Man.

Thus, Tagore is also a *naturalist* as he believes that the natural environment helps the child to train his natural senses. He says that the teaching of different subjects may be made natural through the utilisation of the various elements in the child's environment. He was not in favour of rigid classroom structures with buildings, furniture and books. According to Tagore, these were the imitation of the western model of education. He was against the bookish learning and believed that there should not be any fixed curriculum as it would bring in rigidity into the teaching -learning process. Both teacher and pupil actively participate in the learning process. For him, freedom is essential for the overall development of the child. Freedom to learn whatever they want, freedom generates knowledge; it enables self realisation and self improvement.

**Integral Development**

The purpose of education is not merely the enrichment of one's self with pure knowledge, but also development of bonds of love and friendship between men. Tagore says that education is the development of the intellectual faculties of human beings along with the physical, moral as well as religious aspects. Thus, it is the integral development of human personality so as to create men and women who will work for welfare of the society and for the progress of the nation.

**Physical and Mental Development**

Tagore strongly condemned the prevalent education system that partially developed the intellect and completely neglect the development of the human body. He advises that the human body must systematically be engaged in some fruitful work. He thus, emphasises on sports and games in school education. He says that through physical activities the children come in contact with the nature, and, obtain the nourishment for the body, happiness of the mind and satisfaction of the natural impulses of childhood.

Intellectual development of the child should not be based on knowledge on from the books; it creates a gulf between man and nature. The power of thinking, creativity and imagination is developed through free exercise of the mind. According to Tagore, the prevalent education system puts too much stress on memory and promotes rote learning.

**Learner and the Environment**

The environments of the learners play a vital role in the development of their senses. Tagore believed that education consists of the awareness of one's natural surrounding and also the use of any useful material in it. Education should facilitate an individual to imbibe one's cultural heritage and enable them to use it in their interaction with the environment. He says that the aim of education is to establish a harmony between the learner and their environment.

**The Siksa Satra – Sriniketan**

Tagore's idea of rural reconstruction took a concrete form with the commencement of the Siksa Satra Experiment. He believed that no education in India can be complete without the knowledge and understanding of the patterns of rural living and subsequent efforts being made for rejuvenation of rural life. Rabindranath closely observed the hardship of rural living while managing his family estates. He realised that education is extremely necessary for the regeneration of the Indian Villages. Thus, the ideals of Sriniketan included along with literacy, social reform and rural welfare. It also promoted *vocational education* for the villager, teaching them methods and techniques for better farming practices and other vocations.

**Language: Medium of Instruction**

Universal education means that the education should be available as well as accessible to the masses without any discrimination. Thus, Tagore says that if education has to enter into the deeper strata of the society and has to bring about a permanent impact; mother tongue has to be adopted as the medium of instruction. The main cause for the poor state of education in British India has been due to English language as it lead to the alienation of the indigenous people of the country.

On the other hand Tagore also supports that the more languages you learn, the greater access you gain to knowledge of varied domains. He says that while mother tongue binds an individual to their culture, English language liberates and integrates with the world community. It bridges the gap and facilitates knowledge exchange; the growing knowledge in the field of science and other modern subjects. He is thus a nationalist as well as an internationalist. His belief in unification of the international community lead to the foundation of *Vishva Bharati*, the world university to build friendship among all the nations of the world.

Tagore was strictly against any form of disciplinary action or corporal punishment against the students. He believed that there is no need to discipline the students; they should be allowed to make mistakes so that through *self realisation* they learn from them. This will make them self disciplined and self determined.

**Tagore's Philosophy in Indian Education System**

Education in independent India has transformed over the years. The foundation of the Constitution of India, the formulation of the Nation System of Education, the National Curriculum Framework, the various policies and schemes of the government, the landmark Right to Education Act, etc. has given a concrete shape to the basic ideals and philosophy of the Indian Education System. There have been remarkable developments and changes in the country, but still Rabindranath Tagore's philosophies are as relevant as they were in his times. He was a visionary who had visualised the 21st Century India.

Today, although we see reflections of Tagore's philosophy in our system but, in certain aspects there is a need to reconsider his philosophy. Tagore's educational philosophy focuses too much on the *spiritual* development of the child. It is more ascetic and monastic in pursuit. It may not be suitable for the realities of the fast paced, modern technological world.

National system of education in India demands that a structure or scheme of school and college classes should be there which is uniform all over the nation. There is also the need for a *National Curriculum* without which universal education cannot be promoted. This ideal of India's national educational system goes against Tagore's philosophy of no fixed

curriculum.

The national system of education recognises the *crucial role of teacher* as does Tagore in his philosophies. It also discusses about their competitive emoluments and trainings, but sadly in practice the data reveal that due to shortage of teachers, para teachers are appointed who are paid minuscule wages and the scope of training is also limited. They hardly have any say and are no more than wage labourers. The low morale and the incapacity of the teachers affects the learning abilities of the students. Thus the value and respect of a teacher is getting compromised. Teacher pupil relations also affect the learning of the children. The teacher often assumes an authoritative role in the teaching process, while the pupil remains passive.

*Classrooms in a natural setting* may not be possible in all areas of the country, thus, the national system of education states that classroom learning should be backed with practical experiences or socially useful productive work. Thus, the scope of the child learning from their natural environment and developing their natural senses gets limited. Moreover, for such practices to be fruitful, teachers of high intellectual and spiritual capacities are need to guide the children. Also, such big open spaces may not be available and thus, schooling in India is structured with buildings and furniture etc.

An important question that arises is that in an education system which is inclined towards getting good grades, how do we analyse and judge the development of the moral values of a child, how can a child develop their natural senses and enable self realisation and self determination in them. There is too much of competition and *too much pressure on the children and the teachers to perform well*, leading to rote learning and cramming.

There are also a number of *other indicators* which play a very important role in the education system today. The funding for running the schools- grants and aids, the administration, the community involvement and the government etc., on which Tagore's philosophy does not show a clear picture. The purpose of education today is more of a utilitarian one rather than solely of attaining the ultimate reality, the Universal Man. Thus, Tagore's philosophy of *vocational training* for earning livelihood has been incorporated in the Indian education system (in NPE 1986, as modified in 1992). This will help in the capacity building of the students and increase their employability.

Thus, in the times to come, there might be more and more developments in the field of education but, Rabindranath Tagore's thoughts and philosophies will continue to guide us and encourage us to strive towards becoming perfect men and women citizens of the world community.

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