

**THE EDUCATIONAL MISSION OF
RABINDRANATH TAGORE**

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by

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Certified that the Thesis Entitled

The Educational Mission of Rabindranath Tagore

submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of

Prof. (retd.) Ananda Lal

And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has **been** submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere / elsewhere.

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Supervisor:

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Candidate:

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

India is a land where education has flourished in numerous forms and through varied traditions for four thousand years. The pursuit of knowledge that began in the Vedic period continued through the formation of multiple epistemologies that exerted their influence even beyond the geographical boundaries of India. From the Vedic period onwards, the process of being educated involved not just collecting vast amounts of data from the world but a lifestyle that caused an individual to look deeply within oneself and, from that inward journey, understand one's relation with the world at large. It became a tool for self-analysis and self-study that also allowed a learner to determine and temper his responses to stimuli from the world.

However, this does not imply that these traditions of learning were entirely esoteric in nature. Rather, the Vedas encouraged education that would render an individual fit to carry out his duties successfully in accordance with his position in the social order. This approach changed under the influence of Buddhism and Jainism, which aimed to deconstruct the very social order that Vedic civilization had upheld. Buddhist epistemology led to the creation of one of the richest epochs of the culture of education in ancient India. The Buddhist centres of learning – Nalanda, Vikramshila, Taxila being some of the most revered names – attracted seekers of knowledge from all over Asia.

But both the Vedic and the Buddhist traditions of education that enjoyed community sanction in ancient India were lost to the pages of history as India negotiated her way through the medieval age down to the colonial period. By the time colonized India started sending her children to formal school again, the system of education had received such a thorough overhauling that it produced suitably colonized subjects but failed to create enlightened students capable of independent thought and action. The earlier elements of self-knowledge and self-analysis were conspicuous by their absence in the education that was provided at the schools of the colonial master.

Mohit Chakrabarti describes the intrinsic value of education as one that rids the mind of ignorance and apathy. He elaborates:

Human knowledge and experience are, therefore, always in need of crystallization and recrystallisation. Such processes are continuous and unending, and, as such, the inherent philosophy of education instils a deeper faith in humanity – a faith that reconnotates man from merely being a human being. ...Philosophy of education ensures the unlimited growth of the mind ...it represents a pivotal force of self-purification by means of endless self-askance and self-enquiry.¹

This quest for understanding one's self was completely absent in the agenda of the colonial school. The colonial master was not interested in the self-knowledge of the subjects whom he was coaching in his school in order to turn them into fitting cogs in the machinery of the colonial state. Education became a mechanical procedure that aimed to stuff a student's mind with as much data as it could contain, and indoctrinate it covertly with a cultural inferiority complex, producing degree-holders whose minds were crippled, if not brainwashed, through a complete negligence of their analytical and imaginative faculties.

It is in the context of such an educational practice that Rabindranath Tagore posited a completely opposite approach to education that did not aim to prepare students for passing examinations, but sought to facilitate the development of the inner potential of the young learners. Tagore's approach was radically experimental in the milieu of his times. He abhorred the education system practiced at the colonial school and criticized its operational methods and the adverse effect it produced in the following words:

Children's minds are sensitive to the influences of the great world to which they have been born. This delicate receptivity of their passive mind helps them, without their feeling any strain, to master language, that most complex instrument of expression full of ideas that are indefinable and symbols that deal with abstractions. Through their natural gift of guessing, children learn the meaning of the words which we cannot explain.

But it is just at this critical period that the child's life is brought into the education factory, lifeless, colourless, dissociated from the context of the universe,

¹ Mohit Chakrabarti, *Pioneers in Philosophy of Education* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1995), 17.

with bare white walls staring like eyeballs of the dead. The children have to sit inert whilst lessons are pelted at them like hailstones on flowers.²

The graphic nature of the description, with its intense metaphors, effectively conveys Tagore's disgust at the prevalent education system. He states clearly that the colonial school is no more than a "factory" with its walls as starkly unsettling as the eyes of the dead.

The outcome of this mechanical education was so detrimental to the student that it rendered him into an "other" in the context of his own culture and civilization. The student of the colonial school was given no access to any education rooted in his own culture; there was no possibility whereby the student could relate the lessons drummed into him with his own life. By the time the student graduated from school, he would be turned into a strange creature neither Indian nor English in his sensibilities. The education system alienated the learner from his own countrymen and simultaneously prevented him from acquiring an identity of his own. The ineffective and mechanical imitation of the English neither gave the student a proper understanding of the native culture of the Englishman nor left him with the appreciation of or ability to value his own culture. Tagore describes this crippled process of imitation thus:

When man realizes his own individuality, it stimulates his desire to grow greater. The growth of greatness for an individual can only become real by establishing wide relationship with a large number of other individuals.

...All this time we have been receiving education on purely western lines. When this first began, western culture was imbued with a supreme contempt for that of the East. And to this day, consequently, we have been brought up in this contempt. This speaks of internal dissensions within the temple of Mother Saraswati. Her eastern sons kept closed the door leading to the western side for fear of adulteration, and her western sons barred their eastern through want of respect. Meanwhile the system of education in India remained absurdly un-Indian, making no adequate provision for our own culture.³

² Rabindranath Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3, ed. Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), 626.

³ *Ibid*, 459 & 467.

Here, Tagore clearly states the need for an individual to relate himself with the world around him. The lack of a conducive education prevented the same from happening. However, Tagore does not indulge in a blanket rejection of Western knowledge. Rather, he regrets that the people of the East narrowed their vision as a result of their own insecurity. He does not reject Western epistemology but condemns an education process that leaves the student with no sense of his socio-cultural roots. Tagore minces no words while describing it as “absurdly un-Indian”. It is this un-Indian educational practice that he seeks to redress through his educational mission. What he set himself against was the institutionalized practice of imbuing students with national prejudices that the colonial master had about the Indian character. He wanted students to grow aware of their own roots and in order to facilitate this, he enlisted help from enlightened minds from the West as well as the East. In his description of his school, Tagore clearly delineates his standing on this point: “I have tried to save children from such vicious methods of alienating their minds which are fostered through books, through histories, geographies and lessons full of national prejudices. I have done it with the help of friends from the West.”⁴

The alternative to the colonial education, that Tagore proposes, draws its inspiration from the Vedic model of education that “divided man’s life into four parts following the indication of nature.”⁵ To Tagore, the first part of man’s life, as prescribed by the Vedas, is the most significant in the context of education. This is the stage of *brahmacharya*, which is characterized not simply as a time for memorizing texts; rather, as one for learning to live one’s life. Tagore explains,

Our sages, therefore, keeping in mind the goal of this progress, did not, in life’s first stage of education, prescribe merely the learning of books or things, but *brahmacharya*, the living in discipline, whereby both enjoyment and its renunciation would come equally easy to the strengthened character. Life being a pilgrimage, with liberation in the Supreme Being as its object, the living of it was a spiritual exercise to be carried through its different stages, humbly, reverently and vigilantly.

⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 4, ed. Nityapriya Ghosh (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007), 522.

⁵ *Ibid*, 499.

And the pupil, from his very initiation, had this final consummation kept in his view.⁶

Tagore highlights the necessity of the *brahmachari* to cultivate within him the sense of detachment from all things worldly so that he remains equable in the face of both pleasure and pain, so that he can learn the practice of renunciation that one has to face in one's final stage of life. The emphasis placed upon this philosophy makes it evident that Tagore regards the process of education as intrinsic to the growth and development of the inner being of an individual.

The Vedic model provided Tagore an ideal of both school and schoolmaster. His educational enterprise was as much about creating the right kind of teacher as instilling the right kind of education. The ideal of the *tapovan* or forest hermitage exerted a powerful attraction on Tagore's imagination and he wished to create a school that would capture the spirit of the *tapovan* of ancient India. Tagore describes the image of a *tapovan* that he bore in his mind as:

... ত্যাগের দ্বারাই ভোগ করবে এইটি উপনিষদের অনুশাসন, এইটেই কুমারসম্ভব কাব্যের মর্মকথা, এবং এইটেই আমাদের তপোবনের সাধনা। লাভ করবার জন্যে ত্যাগ করবে।

... আমাদের কবিরা সকলেই বলেছেন তপোবন শান্তরসাম্পদ। তপোবনের যে একটি বিশেষ রস আছে সেটি শান্তরস। শান্তরস হচ্ছে পরিপূর্ণতার রস। যেমন সাতটা বর্ণরশ্মি মিলে গেলে তবে সাদা রঙ হয়, তেমনি চিন্তের প্রবাহ নানা ভাগে বিভক্ত না হয়ে যখন অবিচ্ছিন্নভাবে নিখিলের সঙ্গে আপনার সামঞ্জস্যকে একেবারে কানায় কানায় ভরে তোলে তখনই শান্তরসের উদ্ভব হয়।

তপোবনের সেই শান্তরস। এখানে সূর্য-অগ্নি বায়ুজল স্থল-আকাশ তরুলতা মৃগ-পক্ষী সকলের সঙ্গেই চেতনার একটি পরিপূর্ণ যোগ। এখানে চতুর্দিকের কিছুই মানুষের বিচ্ছেদ নেই এবং বিরোধ নেই।⁷

[...one can enjoy earthly pleasures only though the act of forsaking. This is the disciple of the Upanishads, the message at the core of *Kumarsambhavam* and the endeavour of our *tapovan*. One has to give up in order to gain something.

⁶ Ibid, 500.

⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 7 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1988), 696. When quoting from Bengali sources, I have translated the excerpts into English within square brackets.

All our poets have stated that the *tapovan* bears *shanta rasa*.⁸ The special *rasa* of the *tapovan* is *shanta rasa*. *Shanta rasa* is the *rasa* of fulfillment. The way rays of seven colours blend to form the colour white, similarly when the flow of the mind does not divide itself into many but harmonizes itself intrinsically and completely with the world, therein occurs the birth of *shanta rasa*.

That *shanta rasa* belongs to the *tapovan*. In a *tapovan*, complete connection exists between the consciousness and every other thing that includes the sun, fire, wind, water, land, sky, trees, deer and birds. There, no separation or opposition occurs between man and everything around him.]

Tagore repeatedly refers to *tapovan* in his essays. Perhaps the reason of this appeal was his own deep conviction that nature has much more to teach a young learner than the conventional schoolmaster with his set list of books. Tagore repeatedly criticizes the way teachers taught in the colonial school, as is evident from the essays *Shikshar Herpher* (The Lack of Cohesion in Education) and *Shiksha Samasya* (Problems of Education) – both of which have been translated as part of this dissertation. Their mode of instruction alienated the young learner from the world of nature and imprisoned them within walls of books that provided him with neither instruction nor pleasure. Textbooks themselves had little that was intelligible to offer to hold learners in their thrall. So, learning became a process of simple memorization of the facts and figures contained in the books with no actual ability to analyze or comprehend the lessons. In his essay, “The Schoolmaster”, Tagore points out where, according to him, the error lay in the prevalent mode of instruction practiced by teachers of the colonial school –

He [the schoolmaster] wants to mould the child’s mind according to his ready-made doctrines and therefore wants to rid the child’s world of everything that he thinks will go against his purpose. He excludes the whole world of colour, of movement, of life, from his education scheme, and snatching the helpless creature from the

⁸ The *rasa* of tranquility. *Rasa*, variously translated as flavour, essence and emotion, refers to classical Indian aesthetics, where the artist’s ideal is to evoke one of nine *rasas* in the receiver. *Shanta rasa* is regarded as the highest.

Mother heart of Nature, shuts it in his prison-house, feeling sure that the imprisonment is the surest method of improving the child mind.⁹

This description conveys an almost predatory image of the conventional schoolmaster who imposed his regulations upon the budding learners. The result of being a captive to such a schoolmaster is a complete sensory deprivation that renders the child incapable of knowing the world on his own terms. The contrast between the orientation of the educational practice of ancient India and Tagore's contemporary India is underlined when he states that seekers of knowledge, in ancient times, went to the guru and addressed the questions rising in their minds to the guru, who oriented his teaching around the spirit and subject of enquiry that had been placed in front of him. So, the process of teaching was guided by the need of the learner. The colonial school, on the other hand, ignored this basic principle and dished out whatever lesson it felt was needed by the student in the process, debilitating the natural curiosity of the learner. In an address to the people of Japan, Tagore stated,

In the former times in our country our *gurus*, our masters, our teachers, would keep to their own seats and those who wanted to listen to them had to come around them and, through questioning them, would find out what they sought. Now our speaker of the present day goes but hawking his fruit from meeting to meeting without knowing what the audience needs, whether their attention is fixed on his words, whether they come out of mere curiosity, not prepared to accept any lesson whatever, and yet having to go on talking at interminable length...¹⁰

Here, Tagore is specifically contrasting a public lecture with the teaching-learning process of ancient India but the principles would hold true for the school education system as well. His use of the word "hawking" captures the commercial nature of the educational institutions and clearly conveys that the lessons there were not oriented to the needs of their students. They were also not mindful of whether what they were doling out was doing any intellectual service to the student. Like the public lecturer in Tagore's address, the teacher of the colonial school merely performed indifferently the role that he was assigned and did not strive to understand whether what he was delivering was getting conveyed in any shape or form, to his students. This lack of commitment

⁹ Ibid, 505.

¹⁰ *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 4, 504.

and personal investment was something Tagore wanted to remedy in his own educational institution.

Tagore's insistence is that nature has her own unique way of educating the child-mind through varied sensory impressions, and any education acquired through sensory deprivation would only be a crippled education that would neither aid in the intellectual and psychological development of the child nor provide him an adequate basis of knowledge that he would be able to draw from later in life. The urgent need that Tagore felt for the child-mind to come to a close and unhindered proximity with nature is clearly expressed by him in the essay *Ashramer Rup o Bikash* (The Form and Development of the Ashram). Here, he articulates the inherent shortcoming of the conventional schoolmaster and his teaching techniques by contrasting the same with the world of nature:

এক দিকে অরণ্যবাসে দেশের উন্মুখ বিশ্বপ্রকৃতি আর-এক দিকে গুরুগৃহবাসে দেশের শুদ্ধতম উচ্চতম সংস্কৃতি— এই উভয়ের ঘনিষ্ঠ সংস্পর্শে তপোবনে একদা যে নিয়মে শিক্ষা চলত আমি কোনো-এক বক্তৃতায় তার প্রতি আমার শ্রদ্ধা ব্যাখ্যা করেছিলাম। বলেছিলাম, আধুনিক কালে শিক্ষার উপাদান অনেক বাড়তে হবে সন্দেহ নেই, কিন্তু তার রূপটি তার রসটি তৈরি হয়ে উঠবে প্রকৃতির সহযোগে, এবং যিনি শিক্ষা দান করবেন তাঁর অন্তরঙ্গ আধ্যাত্মিক সংসর্গে। শুনে সেদিন গুরুদাস বন্দোপাধ্যায় মহাশয় বলেছিলেন, এ কথাটি কবিজনোচিত, কবি এর অত্যাব্যশ্যকতা যতটা কল্পনা করেছেন আধুনিক কালে ততটা স্বীকার করা যায় না। আমি প্রত্যুত্তরে তাঁকে বলেছিলাম, বিশ্বপ্রকৃতি ক্লাসে ডেকের সামনে বসে মাস্টারি করেন না, কিন্তু জলে স্থলে আকাশে তাঁর ক্লাস খুলে আমাদের মনকে তিনি যে প্রবল শক্তিতে গড়ে তোলেন কোনো মাস্টার কি তা পারে। আরবের মানুষকে কি আরবের মরুভূমিই গড়ে তোলে নি— সেই মানুষই বিচিত্র ফলশস্যশালিনী নীলনদীতীরবর্তী ভূমিতে যদি জন্ম নিত তা হলে কি তার প্রকৃতি অন্যরকম হত না।¹¹

[On one hand, the engagement with the wide-open world of nature that occurs in forest-living, while on the other, the purest and highest culture of the country fulfilled by living at the guru's abode – the mode of education that prevailed at the *tapovan* through an intimate connection between these two, is something that I had expressed my reverence for in some lecture. I had said that there is undoubtedly the

¹¹ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14 (Kolkata: Visvabharati, 1989), 233.

need to expand the resources of education in the modern world but its form and essence would be attained by the aid of nature and through intimate spiritual connection with the one who would teach. Hearing this, Gurudas Bandyopadhyay had said that this statement is a poetic one; one cannot accept the relevance of this in the modern world with as much intensity as a poet feels. To that, I had replied saying that while the world of nature does not lecture from a desk, the way she moulds our minds strongly through her classes held on the water, land and in the sky, is not something that a schoolmaster can achieve. Have the people of Arabia not been formed by the desert of Arabia? Had the same people been born in a land by a river – full of varied flora and fauna – would their character have not been different?]

For Tagore, the significance of a child being educated in close proximity with nature also lay in the resultant freedom that the child gained. This freedom is regarded by him as an essential element of the development of the child-mind. The colonial school had no such scope or intent. Where the colonial school sought to regiment the movements and thinking of a child, Tagore wanted to set them free so that it can explore the infinite possibilities that the world of nature has to offer. This exploration is in itself the greatest lesson in Tagore's educational philosophy.

These ideas foregrounded by Tagore were all put into action when he took the radical decision of starting his own school that was modelled on the Vedic *gurukul* [residential school], alongside implementing his own realizations about what a child needed in order to prosper and be happy. Two and a half decade after successfully implementing his ideal system of education, and witnessing the healthy development of the minds and bodies of his students, Tagore states that his philosophy of education is neither abstract nor remote from the children who are at the centre of it. He shares one of his core values of educating children – "...I have my passport, as a poet, to enter into the mystery of the child life, and my love for the child is not patronizing; it is full of respect. Somehow children soon find it out, in spite of the exaggeration of my grey beard. I have nearly always been fortunate to win their love."¹² This respect for children that Tagore upholds is one of the fundamental reasons behind the success of his radical educational experiment. He neither dismissed nor disregarded the child's own wishes and needs. His entire approach to

¹² *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* vol. 4, 526.

educating children focuses on the child, and that is where his educational philosophy departs from everything else that was being enacted by the education policy of the colonial masters.

Tagore did not seek newer ways to sweeten the same pill of education for children. His was an attempt to revolutionize the entire process of education. This new system demanded a teacher completely different from the colonial schoolmaster, a new syllabus, a new method of teaching and evaluating, and, finally, a new goal that the students were taught in the new system to aim to achieve:

সামাজিক বিদ্যালয়ের পুরাতন শিকল এবং রাজকীয় বিদ্যালয়ের নূতন শিকল দুইই আমাদের মনকে যে পরিমাণে বাঁধিতেছে সে পরিমাণে মুক্তি দিতেছে না। ইহাই আমাদের একমাত্র সমস্যা। নতুবা নূতন প্রণালীতে কেমন করিয়া ইতিহাস মুখস্থ সহজ হইয়াছে বা অঙ্ক কষা মনোরম হইয়াছে, সেটাকে আমি বিশেষ খাতির করিতে চাই না। কেননা আমি জানি, আমরা যখন প্রণালীকে খুঁজি তখন একটা অসাধ্য শস্তা পথ খুঁজি। মনে করি, উপযুক্ত মানুষকে যখন নিয়মিত ভাবে পাওয়া শক্ত তখন বাঁধা প্রণালীর দ্বারা সেই অভাব পূরণ করা যায় কি না। মানুষ বারবার সেই চেষ্টা করিয়া বারবারই অকৃতকার্য হইয়াছে এবং বিপদে পড়িয়াছে। ঘুরিয়া ফিরিয়া যেমন করিয়াই চলি-না কেন শেষকালে এই অলঙ্ঘ্য সত্যে আসিয়া ঠেকিতেই হয় যে, শিক্ষকের দ্বারাই শিক্ষাবিধান হয়, প্রণালীর দ্বারা হয় না। মানুষের মন চলনশীল, এবং চলনশীল মনই তাহাকে বুঝিতে পারে।¹³

[The extent to which our minds are being bound by both the old chain of social school and the new chain of royal school, allows no such freedom to our minds. Herein lies our only problem. Otherwise, I do not wish to pay much regard to how new methods make it is easier to memorize history or render doing mathematics more likeable. That is because I know that when we search for a method, we look for an impossible and cheap way. We think that since it is difficult to get hold of a suitable person regularly, it would perhaps be possible to compensate that loss through a set method. Man has repeatedly failed in such an attempt and has faced the danger of it. No matter how we distract ourselves, we finally have to arrive at

¹³ Rabindranath Tagore, “*Shikshabidhi*,” in *Rabindra-Rachanabali*, vol. 13 (Kolkata: Visvabharati, 1989), 698.

this inevitable truth that teaching is facilitated by the teacher and not by the method. The mind of man is dynamic and only a dynamic mind can understand it.]

Thus, Tagore's educational philosophy is not simply a new methodology that he implemented in his institution. It is a holistic vision that wants to reinvent the entire process of education and Tagore places the teacher right at the heart of that process. His philosophy envisions the right teacher, the right lessons, the right classroom and the right setting for education to flourish. Tagore describes his ideal teacher, who is central to the success of his educational experiment, as someone full of respect, patience and forgiveness in his interaction with his students:

The minds of the students are always expanding. ...The process of development has not stopped in them. They still carry about with them this suggestiveness of perfection. For that reason, the true teacher respects them, and suffers them to come near him in love.¹⁴ He forgives them all their short-comings and patiently helps to open out their minds towards freedom and light. But those, in their pride of greater knowledge or of special or racial position, are ready to insult the student at every step, will never receive homage from them; and so in despair they will attempt in vain to extort obedience and reverence by the help of stringent regulations and official myrmidons.¹⁵

Tagore wanted to put into action these ideas that were often dismissed in his society as romantic ruminations of a poet. He wanted to demonstrate the actual operation and execution of his philosophy in the material world. His school at Santiniketan was the outcome of this intent.

The idea of opening a school at rural Bolpur in Bengal, and named Santiniketan ("abode of peace"), was not originally Tagore's. The trust deed of the Santiniketan ashram that was formally inaugurated in 1888, under the initiative of Tagore's father Debendranath Tagore, stated the intent of founding a Brahma Vidyalaya (school), a Brahma Mandir (temple) and a bookshop

¹⁴ This line is written in relation to the Biblical statement of Jesus Christ – "Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for such is the Kingdom of heaven" – that Tagore has quoted in the paragraph prior to this one.

¹⁵ *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 4, 266.

in the ashram. Accordingly, the construction of the Mandir dedicated to Brahma, the prime godhead in Hinduism, was completed in 1891. Thereafter the Mandir became a centre of devotion and spirituality of the Brahma faith that Debendranath had espoused, a reformist monotheist community that worshipped Brahma but without any idolatry. It can be inferred that the kind of school that was intended initially, as found in the trust deed, would have been a theologically-driven institution where the thrust would have been on spiritual development and spiritual cultivation in general.¹⁶

In accordance with the trust deed, a building was constructed near the main Santiniketan house for the purpose of serving as a school. The house was formally inaugurated on 22 December 1899. Balendranath Tagore, grandson to Debendranath and nephew to Rabindranath, assumed the responsibilities of founding the school at the ashram. He had even prepared a constitution for it. But Balendranath's untimely death in 1899 prevented the actualization of the school.

When Tagore decided to embark on his educational experiment, he chose Santiniketan as the site for his new school. In 1901, he moved with his wife and children to Santiniketan and started his school that was known both as Brahmavidyalaya and Brahmacharyashram. While Tagore did want to maintain the essence of Santiniketan as a centre of spiritual cultivation, his school was not a theological school. It was a residential school that was initially exclusively for young boys. Some years later, girls were also admitted. The female section of the Brahmavidyalaya ran for a brief period of two years after which it had to be closed. Girls were unable to join till 1921. The details of the female section and the reasons why it had to close down and could not reopen till 1921 would be discussed in Chapter V of this dissertation.

Brahmavidyalaya was modelled on the *gurukul* and *tapovan* of ancient India in which Tagore aimed to recreate the ethos and milieu of the Vedic ashram where the interpersonal relation between the guru and his students would emulate that of the guru-*shishya* (disciple) tradition of ancient India. Tagore, at that point, was certainly influenced by the rising tide of nationalism in India, which also drove Indians to trace their roots to the Vedic civilization both as a process of identity-building and of resisting the British colonization. Tagore was actively involved in the operations of the Indian National Congress at the time of the foundation of the Brahmavidyalaya.

¹⁶ Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar, *Kabir Pathshala: Patha Bhavana o Shikshasatrer Itihas* (Kolkata: Signet, 2015), 7-8.

However, he gradually realized the inevitable narrowness in the exclusively Hindu nationalism and its pitfalls in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country like India. As Tagore distanced himself from active politics, he also expanded the range and scope of his educational institution beyond that of being an imitation of a Vedic *gurukul*. It assumed a character uniquely its own as Tagore introduced multiple new aspects to the course of the school, like the performing arts, fine arts and social service, among others.

Tagore's school was much more than simply an attempt to recapture the milieu and functional principles of a Vedic school. It constantly tested its own boundaries by introducing new elements in the education it imparted and challenged itself by breaking the rules it had set for itself during its early days. It vindicated Tagore's philosophy of education, thereby paving the path to the formation of the Visva-Bharati university in 1921.

The period from 1901 to 1921 can thus be referred to as the Brahmavidyalaya period. It provided the testing ground for Tagore's ideas of education. His philosophy too grew alongside the growth of his school. It was a symbiotic process where Tagore was constantly testing his methods of education which in turn allowed him to fully form his philosophy of education. The importance of the Brahmavidyalaya period cannot be overstated in the context of Tagore as an educationist.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

This dissertation focuses exclusively on Tagore's philosophy and practice of school education. Thus, the Brahmavidyalaya is central to the range and scope of the dissertation, which I have divided into two parts. The first part comprises two main aspects. Firstly, it seeks to understand what constitutes Tagore's philosophy of school education and how that philosophy is rooted in Tagore's inspiration from the Vedas. I attempt to pinpoint which specific sources could have acted as inspiration. To do so, I engage in a reading of the Vedas as well as the Buddhist Pitakas, as ancient India had very rich traditions of both Vedic as well as Buddhist education systems. Even though Tagore explicitly stated the Vedic model as his inspiration, he was also extremely well versed with Buddhist epistemology and his poetry and plays reveal the influence of Buddhism quite clearly. It thereby necessitates examining whether the Buddhist education system had an impact on his

philosophy of school education. The dissertation also tries to understand where Tagore's educational philosophy stands independent of the Vedic model and creates a character for itself that is uniquely of his own creation. Finally, it interrogates the nature of Tagore's education system to analyse how it becomes a medium of resisting ideological colonization.

This dissertation enters into an analysis of pertinent fiction, poetry and drama by Tagore to understand both how they are influenced by the educational philosophy of Tagore and how they constitute sources of gleaning an understanding of Tagore's attitude towards education. Tagore's educational philosophy exists not only in the form of the essays written by him but also as expressed via his poetry, fiction and plays. A thorough and complete understanding of Tagore's educational philosophy necessitates engaging with In order to arrive at the unique character of Tagore's educational philosophy, it is necessary to analyse the daily operations of his school. As stated earlier, Tagore's philosophy runs hand in hand with the way his school functioned. The functioning of Brahmavidyalaya helps one to understand this philosophy just as much as his own writing does. In fact, the operation of the Brahmavidyalaya and Tagore's philosophy of school education are so intrinsically interlinked that a discussion of each is incomplete without the other.

Therefore, the dissertation creates a memorial reconstruction of life at the Brahmavidyalaya involving all its stakeholders. The reconstruction uses as source material the numerous memorial accounts by students, teachers and parents of students at Brahmavidyalaya. While there is no dearth of memoirs about Santiniketan, the bulk of those accounts focus on the years after the formation of Visva-Bharati, in other words, after 1921. The accounts that exist from the Brahmavidyalaya period do collectively allow one to gain a picture of Tagore's education system, though individually they accounts are anecdotal. They do not contain any chronological record or any sense of objectivity as they are subjective by their very nature. The challenge of using these as source material, however, is superseded by the richness of their content and the insight that one gains into the minutiae of everyday life at the ashram. By a close investigation of these source materials, the dissertation recaptures how Tagore executed his philosophy of school education in the daily function of Brahmavidyalaya and how Brahmavidyalaya, in its turn, aided Tagore in the formation of his philosophy. The memorial reconstruction explores such specific elements of the school as how classes were taken, what the daily routine was like for the students, how their performance was evaluated, what constituted the coursework for them, what activities

they conducted aside from obviously academic ones, the inclusion of performing arts and fine arts as an intrinsic part of life at the ashram, and the hurdles that the burgeoning institution had to face, be they economic, societal or otherwise.

Another significant area of inquiry is Tagore's attitude and approach to female education. The dissertation questions whether his system was discriminatory in any sense or if it treated students, male or female, alike. This topic is rather difficult to approach from the perspective of memorial accounts as the present writer has not found any first-hand reminiscence of students from the female section of Brahmavidyalaya, nor has any teacher left behind such an account. There are only some secondary sources like the accounts by female students during the Visva-Bharati period who describe the female section of Brahmavidyalaya as related to them by those who witnessed that time. For example, I use the memorial account of Amita Sen, a student of Tagore's school after it expanded into Visva-Bharati.

In order for the study to be complete, the dissertation refers to the numerous essays on school education by Tagore. The parallel process of analysing those essays and memorial reconstruction of ashram life in all its aspects facilitates a full understanding of his educational philosophy as well as the practical implementation of his ideas about school education proposed in these essays. Therefore, the second part of the dissertation consists of my own translations of Tagore's Bengali essays specifically on school education and one essay on female education. Tagore has a large body of essays on education in general, which range from primary education to university education, alongside topics like student self-governance and the University Bill. For the purpose of this dissertation, only the essays dealing directly with school education have been chosen for translation.

These essays are of the greatest significance since Tagore did not produce a single treatise on the subject of education or a unified theory of education. His philosophy of school education has to be gleaned mainly from these essays, most of which have not been translated into English. Of the essays chosen for translation, two were translated by Tagore himself: "*Shiksha Samasya*" (1906) translated as "The Problems of Education" (1906) and "*Shikshar Herpher*" (1892) translated as "The Vicissitudes of Education" (1892). The reason for translating these two essays anew is that they are fundamental to a complete understanding of his philosophy and consequently demand faithful renderings. Also, translating them for the purpose of this dissertation affords a

fresh look at and interpretation of the essays that would be at par with current sensibility. “*Shiksha Samasya*” has been translated in 2014 by Subhrangshu Maitra as a part of his book of translations, *Education as Freedom: Tagore’s Paradigm*. Maitra’s translation uses a diction that is much different from the translations included in this thesis. Though Maitra’s translation is indeed modern and proficient, there are certain nuances that the translation misses or interprets differently. For example, Tagore’s usage of the Bengali word “হরিণবাড়ি” has been translated by Maitra as “deer enclosure”.¹⁷ But the word was used in Tagore’s time to refer to the Alipore Prison that was adjacent to a deer park.¹⁸ If this significance is brought into translation, the vehemence with which Tagore is criticizing the colonial school can be fully appreciated as he terms the contemporary school to be a downright prison for its unfortunate students. Accordingly, my translation has used the word “prison house” thereby adding a further nuance to Tagore’s statement. Further, Maitra has translated the word “ভাবটি” Tagore’s sentence “...যে ভাবটি আমার মনের সম্মুখে জাগ্রত হইয়া উঠিয়াছে...”¹⁹ as “sentiment”²⁰. While “sentiment” is indeed in keeping with the dictionary meaning of the word “ভাবটি”, the sentence as a whole is more indicative of Tagore presenting an idea in front of the members of the National Council of Education. Thus, the present translation has used the word “thought” thereby attempting to give an interpretation different from that of Maitra’s.

Other translated essays of this thesis that are in common with Maitra, are, “শিক্ষার হেরফের” (The Lack of Cohesion in Education), “আশ্রমের শিক্ষা” (The Education of the Ashram), “জাতীয় বিদ্যালয়” (National Council of Education), “স্ত্রীশিক্ষা” (Women’s Education). In translation of these essays, the issue of different interpretations resulting from translating nuanced Bengali words holds true. In “স্ত্রীশিক্ষা” (Women’s Education), for instance, Maitra has translated “আদর্শ” as “standard”²¹ whereas in the present translation, it is “ideal”. The interpretation of

¹⁷ Subhrangshu Maitra, *Education as Freedom: Tagore’s Paradigm* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2014), 72.

¹⁸ *Samsad Bengali English Dictionary* (Ed. 3) states the English meaning of “হরিণবাড়ি” as “a prison-house of ancient Calcutta”.

¹⁹ Rabindra Rachanbali vol.6, 577.

²⁰ Maitra, 64.

²¹ Ibid, 137.

“আদর্শ” as “ideal” enables the present translation to highlight how women are compelled by society to live to up an impossible ideal that soars above the flesh and blood reality of the human beings.

Of the other essays translated here, none has been previously translated into English. Most significantly, the essay “*Santiniketan Brahmacharyashram*”, which contains a detailing of the working principles of the school and thus may be regarded as the constitution for the school, has not been included fully in any collection of Tagore’s writings in translation. The only English translation of the section regarded as the constitution has been done by Kathleen M. O’Connell in her book *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator*, where she analyses it for the purpose of scholarship, though her book itself is not a work of translation. Its working principles are of immense importance to the understanding of Tagore’s philosophy of school education for a number of reasons. First, they allow one to see how exactly he was envisioning the character of his school. Second, their legacy was far-reaching as they set the tone for the institution as it evolved in the years to come. Third, they are not an abstract discussion of the philosophy of education. Rather, they consist of directives about conducting day-to-day affairs of the school, instructing about what should be done and what avoided. Finally, this constitution, when compared with the one prepared by Balendranath for the school in accordance with the trust deed of Santiniketan, reveals that Tagore was not aiming to create a theological school but a regular one, following a different model than the colonial school. For all these reasons, its translation is of utmost relevance to this dissertation.

The rest of the essays selected for translation include “*Chhatrabrittir Pathyapustak*”, “*Chhatrader Nitishiksha*”, “*Mushalman Chhatrer Bangla Shiksha*”, “*Jatiya Bidyalay*”, “*Primary Shiksha*”, “*Ashramer Shiksha*”, “*Ashramer Rup o Bikash*”, “*Chhutir Par*”, “*Stri Shiksha*” and “*Muktadhara*”.

Translations of these essays help the modern reader in evaluating and negotiating Tagore’s critique of the way the mechanism of the colonial school functioned as well as the alternative that Tagore proposes and the efficacy of that solution. Translation also becomes a tool via which we can interrogate the ideas posited by Tagore in these essays. One particularly thorny issue that makes its presence felt in them is how Tagore does not consider his student from a gender-neutral perspective. In these essays, a student is not simply a student irrespective of being male or female.

Rather, in all, with the exception of “*Stri Shiksha*”, the student is invariably male who, in translation, has to be referred to as “boy(s)”, “he” or “his”, thereby cancelling any ambiguity that can exist regarding the sex of the student. The Bengali language renders the use of pronouns gender-neutral. In the absence of the application of a gender-neutral pronoun, Tagore’s choice of his student as male stands out blatantly and repeatedly thereby preventing any chance of ignoring or missing the issue.

As these essays were written over the course of Tagore’s long life, they also bear testimony to the changes that were taking place in the arena of education in India. While “*Shikshar Herpher*” was written at the end of the nineteenth century when no prominent alternative to colonial education existed, the essay “*Jatiya Bidyalay*” was read at the inauguration of the National Council of Education, formed as an antithesis to colonial education. These essays thus capture the changing mood of the times and can even be regarded as documentation of the history of modern education in India. Their significance makes it imperative to return to them and reinterpret them through contemporary translation.

Language being a fluid medium, it naturally follows that with the passage of time, older translations become somewhat dated. So, it is beneficial for every age to have its own translations written in accordance with the kind of language familiar to that particular age. Preparing fresh translations thus serves both a linguistic need as well as the need for newer interpretations. This is another rationale for the case of making new translations of Tagore’s previously existing self-translated essays.

This dissertation thereby combines three elements – a study of Tagore’s essays, fiction, poetry and drama in order to distill his philosophy of school education, memorial reconstruction of life at Brahmavidyalaya and, finally, translation of Tagore’s essays dealing with the topic of school education – in order to arrive at a holistic understanding of the educational philosophy of Tagore applied specifically to school education.

SURVEY OF EXISTING LITERATURE

Considering the fact that Tagore revolutionized the approach to education and provided the country with an alternative to the existing educational models of his times, very little research has been

dedicated to the understanding of his philosophy of school education. Of the critical studies that exist in English, most encompass Tagore's institution from the school to the glory days of Visva-Bharati university. There is no dedicated focus on the school education system of Tagore. As Visva-Bharati grew into one of the most exceptional educational institutions of the twentieth century and attracted some of the most brilliant minds of the time to Santiniketan in order to both teach and learn, perhaps it became a greater and more natural magnet for scholarly attention as compared to the quiet, struggling and somewhat humble initial years when the small school was seeking to carve its own form as Brahmavidyalaya.

One of the earliest attempts in English to critically study Tagore's philosophy of education emerged as the Education Number (Volume XII, Parts i & ii, May-October 1947) of *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* edited by Kshitis Roy. This volume comprised articles on the education system in general. Three of Tagore's own essays, "Thoughts on Education", "Education for Rural India" and "The Place of Music in Education and Culture", were included as well in it. This volume is significant to the context of my dissertation owing to the presence of five essays: "Rabindranath and His Asrama School" by Jnanendranath Chattopadhyaya, "Rabindranath's Contribution to Education in India" by Tanayendranath Ghose, "Rabindranath's Educational Ideals and the West" by Alex Aronson, "Tagore's Educational Philosophy in relation to Basic Education" by Anathnath Basu and "Rabindranath Tagore on Education: a Bibliographical Study" by Pulinbehari Sen.

Jnanendranath Chattopadhyaya, as one of the earliest commentators on Brahmavidyalaya, starts his journey of exploring the aspects of Tagore's school from 1910 onwards. He does give the reader a glimpse into how the school was influenced by the *tapovan* ideal and how deeply involved Tagore was in the running of the school. The essay is more documentary than analytical in nature, even though Chattopadhyaya does observe that freedom was one of the bedrocks of the institution. He states:

There was no attempt to impose discipline from above. The result was that a sense of responsibility grew of itself, and they did ever so much for their school without there being any need of a grown-up person goading them. They took initiative in conducting their own

activities in their own way, and they had their own Court of Honour to which sometimes even the teachers were called to record evidence.²²

Chattopadhyaya's account is both vague and an overstatement. The early years of Brahmaavidyalaya have been described by students of that time as being rather overwhelming in the discipline that was demanded of the students. The one sentence that he has dedicated to state the role of discipline at the ashram is a dilution and an exaggeration simultaneously. It is an exaggeration because there was a very systematic timetable that determined what activities the students had to undertake in each hour of the day from their waking in the morning to going to bed at night. On the other hand, the statement is a dilution because it does not explain the difficulty Tagore found himself in when he had to run his school with teachers who were accustomed to conventional school-discipline. Pramathanath Bisi, a student of that era, gives us a far more effective description in his memoir:

উপাসনার জন্য লাইন, জল খাইতে যাবার জন্য লাইন, ভাত খাইতে যাবার জন্যও লাইন, লাইন ছাড়া এক পা চলিবার উপায় ছিল না। দিনের মধ্যে আট-দশবার লাইন করিতে করিতে লাইন ব্যপারটা খুব অভ্যস্ত হইয়া গিয়াছে। ...

রবীন্দ্রনাথ বিদ্যালয় প্রতিষ্ঠা করিয়া ডিসিপ্লিন বিষয়ে নানারূপ বাধার সম্মুখীন হইলেন। শিক্ষকদের তো তিনি গড়িয়া-পিটিয়া তৈরি করেন নাই, তাঁহারা পুরাতন ছাঁচেই মানুষ। ডিসিপ্লিন শব্দটাতে তাঁহারা অভ্যস্ত। তাঁহারা দেখিলেন, এখানে ডিসিপ্লিন কই! এমন-কি, ইঁহাদের চাপে প্রথম প্রথম কবিকে অনেক পরিমাণে স্বমতের সাময়িক পরিবর্তন করিতে হইল। বস্তুত, আশ্রম-প্রতিষ্ঠার প্রথম আমলে ডিসিপ্লিনের কিছু যেন কড়াকড়ি ছিল।²³

[Queueing up for prayer, queueing up for going to get refreshments, queueing up again for meals – there was no possibility of moving an inch without queueing up.

...

After founding the school, Rabindranath faced various problems regarding the issue of discipline. He had not after all, moulded the teachers; the teachers

²² Jnanendranath Chattopadhyaya, "Rabindranath and his Asrama School", *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, New Series, 12 (May-October 1947), 13-14.

²³ Pramathanath Bisi, *Rabindranath o Santiniketan* (Kolkata: Visva-bharati, 1946), 35 and 52.

followed the old conventions. They were used to the word discipline. They observed that such discipline was found at Santiniketan. In fact, pressure from them compelled the poet in the early years to temporarily change his own opinion. Actually, there was rather an excess of discipline in the first era of the establishment of the ashram.]

Bisi's account clarifies the actual situation that prevailed at the ashram concerning the issue of discipline. While he indicates that Tagore might not have favoured the imposition of discipline so much, the insistence of the teachers had indeed made life a rather disciplined affair for the early students of Brahmavidyalaya. It was in the later years, when the school had matured and expanded, that discipline of this kind was no longer imposed.

Such an understanding of the operations of the ashram is possible only when critical essays are read in conjunction with memorial accounts. The latter are small-scale and subjective histories which add immense signification to the study of Tagore's philosophy of school education.

A further point from Chattopadhyaya's essay is that he loosely refers to a body of students called "Court of Honour" but no such court of honour existed. What existed was referred to in Bengali as "বিচারসভা", meaning an assembly for judgement; it was an organ of self-government of the students and its purpose was the execution of justice in a democratic manner. Thus, Chattopadhyaya's account is somewhat misleading as it does not provide the reader with a completely accurate description of the running of Brahmavidyalaya. On one point, however, he provides valuable insight and that is the motivation Tagore felt behind undertaking this enormous educational experiment. He states, "Shocked beyond measure at the colossal loss of youth-power, he found the memory of his boyhood experience of school life revived, and the apprehension dawned on him that the chief problem before the country was education."²⁴

Tanayendranath Ghose's essay primarily states the aims of Tagore in founding his institution and how Visva-Bharati fulfils those aims. Thus, his emphasis is largely on Visva-Bharati. He ends with the very significant conclusion that "Rabindranath was not so much of a dreamer as to have left behind a legacy of mere ideas and ideals without ever having taken the trouble of working out the details of a constructive programme. He did succeed in creating an

²⁴ Chattopadhyaya, 11.

atmosphere in Santiniketan which has been conducive to the fulfillment of his educational ideal.”²⁵ This observation further justifies the necessity of studying Tagore’s philosophy in direct relation to the history of how his school operated.

Alex Aronson asserts that Santiniketan is unique owing to the fact that it has organically grown and developed according to its own inner logic rather than in accordance with a preconceived plan.²⁶ He observes that Tagore’s education system sought to encourage the natural tendencies of the child to exercise inborn inquisitiveness and desire for congenial company. He adds that Tagore treated the fanciful activities of an imaginative child with respect and empathy. Where Western educationists warned society of the danger that can occur if there is a failure to properly regiment a child’s inner being, Tagore’s philosophy avoided such pitfalls by enabling “the play of the child (and even to a certain extent of the adolescent and the adult)” that “replaces external discipline and the bullying propensities inherent in man; and the power of resistance to suggestion is built up through contact with nature, with human beings and with surrounding villages.”²⁷ Aronson describes how Western education systems have failed in training the right kind of intelligence and students are unable to internalize the knowledge that is supplied to them by their textbooks. So, when the time comes for them to join the world of adults, their education leaves them thoroughly unprepared as their textbooks are almost entirely divorced from reality. It is precisely this situation that Tagore wished to remedy through his educational experiment. Aronson also analyses what constituted wisdom for Tagore, by referring to many of his essays. Aronson places prime importance on what he terms “integration” in Tagore’s education system. He opines that Tagore sought to integrate a child with nature, with fellow human beings, with society at large, so that it would foster the development of a natural sense of morality and respect and sympathy for all sentient beings.

Ananthnath Basu’s essay is principally a discussion of Tagore’s philosophy. Basu analyses the role of nature, the concept of the fundamental unity of man, and internationalism. He identifies

²⁵ Tanayendranath Ghose, “Rabindranath’s Contribution to Education in India” *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* insert full details (May-October 1947), 22.

²⁶ Alex Aronson, “Rabindranath’s Educational Ideals and the West,” *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* insert full details (May-October 1947), 32.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 34.

three features as central: “The cardinal principles of his educational philosophy are: 1. freedom, 2. creative self-expression and 3. active communion with nature and man.”²⁸ Basu proceeds to contrast Tagore’s approach to basic education with Mahatma Gandhi’s Wardha Scheme of Basic Education and infers that Tagore’s focus was almost entirely on creative self-expression, whereas the Wardha Scheme took into account the economic and social aspects of craft work.

The bibliography by Pulinbehari Sen compiles all of Tagore’s Bengali writings on education as published in various books and pamphlets, the textbooks composed by Tagore, as well as his essays and letters on the topic of education.

Apart from this special Education Number, there was no proper research on Tagore’s educational philosophy for an extended period. The first in-depth book on the topic appeared in 1962 when H. B. Mukherjee published *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*. Mukherjee writes in the preface, “No apology should be necessary for a serious study of the educational work of the creator of Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati. One may wonder, on the contrary, that there has been hardly any notable attempt in this direction either during the lifetime of Tagore or after his death.”²⁹

Mukherjee’s valuable book consists of an extensive study of Tagore’s writings on education, the founding of Brahmavidyalaya, that of Visva-Bharati, Siksa-Satra, the curriculum and method, the interrelation of education with nature, life, society, internationalism, and finally, the aims that Tagore had for his system. The book spans almost the whole lifetime of Tagore beginning with his own plight as a schoolboy and proceeds to cover the history of his institution as well as discuss his Bengali essays on the subject. Mukherjee refers to the Brahmavidyalaya period as the Santiniketan Period that he dates from 1901 to 1918. He includes more details than any other English book on the stated period. But he does not make use of the wealth of information contained in memorial accounts, apart from Pramathanath Bisi’s recollections. As the scope of his book is vast, it does not focus exclusively on Brahmavidyalaya, nor does it enter into the minutiae

²⁸ Anathnath Basu, “Tagore’s Educational Philosophy in relation with Basic Education”, *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* (May-October 1947), 48.

²⁹ H. B. Mukherjee. *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore* (reprint, New Delhi: Routledge, 2013), xiii.

of its operations. Moreover, Mukherjee discusses Tagore's Bengali essays as a separate entity without drawing the connections that exist between them and the operation of his school.

Sunil Chandra Sarkar's book, *Tagore's Educational Philosophy*, discusses Tagore's emergence as an educationist and the foregrounding of nature and atmosphere in his approach to education. Sarkar states, "Tagore depends more on environment and atmosphere so built up as to spontaneously evoke the pupil's imagination, and emotions, particularly the emotion of love. He opens on the educational scene the floodgates of poetry and art, of the noblest and most delicate sentiments and emotions."³⁰ Sarkar further engages in a comparative study of Tagore's philosophy with the theories of Western educationists such as Dewey. According to him, there lies a striking similarity between Dewey and Tagore as both displayed the capacity of selecting the best that their forerunners had to offer. While Dewey drew inspiration from Rousseau, Tagore found the source of his inspiration in the Vedas. In the analysis of Sarkar, Tagore's philosophy posits neither the child nor the guru at its centre. Rather, Tagore posits life at the centre of his education system:

Tagore makes "life" the centre, not the life of this child or that, nor even a particular aspect of human life in preference to some other, but life as a whole, and at its richest and best, jointly lived by teachers and students. If this remains the centre of attention, the different factors are naturally correlated as also the different aspects of knowledge. ... Education will never attain its true objective unless it concentrates upon life and succeeds in inculcating life interests for their own sake.³¹

Sarkar also provides three primary reasons which, in his opinion, played motivational roles behind Tagore's educational experiment. Sarkar believes that statements that Tagore made at various points of his life testify to the truth of these reasons having driven him towards the founding of Brahmavidyalaya:

1. He needed for his own self-development as man and poet a vaster field of intimate human contact and collective movement. He wanted to transcend his individual limits and find his world.

³⁰ Sunil Chandra Sarkar, *Tagore's Educational Philosophy* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1961), 43.

³¹ *Ibid*, 99.

2. He wanted to give a wider significance to this “new birth” of his own personality and make it emblematic of the renaissance in the country and also to use it as a directing force in that movement of renaissance.
3. He was aware of the urgent need of the human race to move a step forward along its evolutionary road and hoped that his experiment could be invested with a universal meaning and consequence to such an extent as to affect that movement in some manner.³²

Kalyan R. Salkar’s book *Rabindranath Tagore: His Impact on Indian Education* does not have any new insight to offer. It discusses how Tagore’s experience as a schoolboy played a decisive role in his emergence as an educationist. Salkar opines that Tagore’s desire to perfect the soul despite admitting that it is subject to changes owing to its dynamic and continually self-creative nature was one of the factors that led him towards becoming an educationist, as education could be the medium that could channelize the various changes occurring in an individual.³³

It is Bhupendranath Sarkar’s book, *Tagore: The Educator*, that really delves into the functioning of the school. He gives a detailed account of the daily routine; however, this routine is one that was followed by students of later years and not specifically during the inception of Brahmavidyalaya. He also discusses the methods of teaching followed by Tagore and how the poet encouraged his students to run free in the lap of nature so that their faculties are not weighed down by the burden of rote-learning. He also states that Tagore’s modern outlook was responsible for prevention of corporal punishment at the ashram. Tagore had genuine respect and sympathy for the students, which led him to create a congenial atmosphere for them to flourish.³⁴

Mohit Chakrabarti, in *Pioneers in Philosophy of Education*, discusses the educational philosophy of a number of thinkers like Froebel, Dewey, Gandhi and Vivekananda, alongside Tagore. Through his analysis, he demonstrates that freedom and joy were the primary vehicles of imparting education in Tagore’s philosophy. He identifies the special character of Tagore’s school

³² Ibid, 135-136.

³³ Kalyan R. Salkar, *Rabindranath Tagore: His Impact on Indian Education* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1990), 17.

³⁴ Bhupendranath Sarkar, *Tagore: The Educator* (Calcutta: Academic Publishers, 1974), 24.

as being “a living temple”.³⁵ He opines that a living school creates an atmosphere of joyous learning and this, in turn, facilitates the fullness of education. He emphasizes how freedom and joy are intrinsically linked – “Freedom and joy are so closely interwoven in education that apart from these two, education becomes meaningless nonsense.”³⁶ Tagore’s education system champions freedom and joy as the first lesson that is provided to a child, thereby facilitating an unhindered exercise of the senses. It is only in this way that a creative education is rendered possible. The child-mind does not need affluence around it to make its faculties blossom; rather, an austere atmosphere infused with the spirit of freedom and joy enables it to develop fully. It allows the sensitivity of the child’s soul to prosper as the children realize the relation they have with other human beings as well as their surroundings. Chakrabarti also analyses the role of a teacher in Tagore’s education system. He states:

To emancipate the child from the abstraction and dullness in education is what Tagore considers to be an important role of the teacher. Let the teacher ignite the child with his own living spirit of creativity and freedom. Let him show how to be natural with the joyous atmosphere of Nature and explore wider avenues of creative adventure. In order to be so, he must be in close communion with the “living traffic” with knowledge and information and share with his pupils a close vision of looking into every aspect of learning with an endless sense of curiosity.³⁷

Chakrabarti thinks that this kind of freedom and joy allows the child to be liberated from the chains of the foreign linguistic medium of English. It is only through breaking out of the tyranny of the English language that loomed darkly on the mental horizon of the young learner, and letting their intellect function freely through the aid of their mother tongue, that education can truly produce the effect of fullness.

Tagore’s education system, Chakrabarti believes, is one that encourages the learner to embark on a journey of self-discovery and self-revelation through self-creativity. It exposes the students to the process of acquiring self-identity by means of self-analysis and self-evaluation. Chakrabarti also addresses the issue of freedom in the context of discipline. He explains that ample

³⁵ Mohit Chakrabarti, *Pioneers in Philosophy of Education* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1995), 116.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 116-117.

freedom did not mean that the students were encouraged to live an undisciplined life; rather, the freedom was aimed at them to develop a sense of inner discipline on their own.

Tagore allows ample freedom for pupils in education not because they lead undisciplined life but essentially because they will learn discipline by themselves. This principle of self-discipline in education saves a learner from the rigour in the name of so-called discipline in education and also maintains a close relationship between the teacher and the learner.³⁸

Chakrabarti deals with Tagore's education system in another book, *Tagore and Education for Social Change*. There he speaks of how Tagore's philosophy of education can be utilized as a vehicle of social change when applied in the field of mass education: "As a social connoisseur of consciousness, Tagore waits for that education which will be whole-heartedly geared to the mission for emancipation of the self for the prized dependence on the supreme I, the All Enlightened."³⁹ The aims of Tagore's system do not vary when applied to mass education. Even in the case of mass education, Chakrabarti opines, true education is possible only with introspection, as introspection is how an individual associates oneself with society and thereby fulfills their social duties. Tagore's educational experiment also ushers in the spirit of aesthetics to mass education. Tagore's biggest departure from other social thinkers occurs, as stated by Chakrabarti, where he highlights "education as a means of inner awareness that ultimately leads to practice in poignance of the great Upanishadic saying: *bhumaiva sukham nalpe sukhamasti*. Happiness, indeed, is the outcome of embracing vastness by eliminating every aspect of littleness in man."⁴⁰

Tagore's insistence, Chakrabarti feels, is on the unity of mankind that can be achieved through inner efflorescence of social consciousness. Education plays a vital role in this inner efflorescence as education serves as a vehicle of ushering a radical approach to social unity that enables individuals to resist weaknesses and shortcomings as man takes up the mantle of social and global responsibilities. Chakrabarti, like other scholars, points out what Tagore considered as

³⁸ Ibid, 123.

³⁹ Mohit Chakrabarti, *Tagore and Education for Social Change* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing, 2013), 35.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 53.

one of the biggest pitfalls of colonial education, the medium of a foreign language. He also analyses the role of education vis-à-vis socio-aesthetic excellence and states that Tagorean education aims to eliminate negative sentiments towards any creed, custom, functions or festivals on the basis of social discrimination and to heighten the sense of cooperation and service within society. He states, “To learn the lesson of socio-aesthetics from Nature and to cultivate it amongst the members of the [sic] society is the new dimension of education that Tagore strongly asserts for an enlightened global society.”⁴¹

Another significant aspect of Tagore’s school education is the role played by physical movement. This idea is perfectly captured in the essay “The Art of Movement in Education” by Leonard Elmhirst in the book *Rabindranath Tagore: Pioneer in Education*. Elmhirst records how Tagore considered unimpeded physical movement necessary for the working of a child’s thinking process. The prevailing school system that bound a child to a desk in a four-walled classroom for hours prevented the free functioning of a child’s mind. Elmhirst has stated one of the vital characteristics of Tagore’s philosophy, as Tagore was perhaps the earliest voice in India to draw a connection between physical movement and intellectual action specifically when applied to young children.

This point is emphasized by Kathleen M. O’Connell in her book *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator*, where she presents a thorough analysis of Tagore’s contribution as an educationist. She categorizes the different aspects of Tagore’s education system and she refers to the connection between physical activity and thinking process prioritized by Tagore as kinesthetic education. O’Connell bases her discussion of kinesthetic education on the conversation between Tagore and Elmhirst recorded by the later in “The Art of Movement in Education”. O’Connell’s book contains a historiographic study of the development of Tagore’s institution from the beginning of the ashram when Debendranath purchased the land at Bolpur and built the Santiniketan house to serve as a spiritual retreat. She also analyses the educational background of Tagore himself and, in doing so, discusses the cultural milieu of the Tagore household at Jorasanko and the educational practices prevalent within that family. Later in the book, where she discusses the role of aesthetic development in Tagore’s philosophy, she states that he was drawing

⁴¹ Ibid, 119.

inspiration from the “Jorasanko Model”.⁴² She writes, “Drawing on his home life at Jorasanko, Rabindranath tried to create an atmosphere in which the arts would become instinctive.”⁴³ Alongside this, O’Connell categorizes the different aspects of Tagore’s system into the following: nature as living reality, personality, the creative surplus in humanity and absolute Brahman. Her book is perhaps the only one in English that contains details about the Brahmavidyalaya period from its inception to the point when the forest hermitage transformed to a global university. She discusses the struggle of the initial years of the ashram as it tried to sustain itself financially and also searched for the right teachers who would be in harmony with the ethics of the ashram. She does not enter into a critical reading of Tagore’s essays on education simply because that is not the purpose of the book. This book can be regarded as an excellent historical account of the birth and development of the ashram from being a school modelled on the Vedic *tapovan* to a celebrated global university attracting some of the most brilliant minds of the age.

A similar historical study of Brahmavidyalaya can be found in the book *Santiniketan and Sriniketan: The Twin Dreams of Rabindranath Tagore* by Ajit K. Neogy.⁴⁴ Neogy dedicates two chapters of this book to the history of Brahmavidyalaya as it began and marched ahead in spite of the numerous hurdles on its path. This account does not draw from the numerous memorial accounts of the period but bases itself on verifiable facts from correspondence of that period as well as biographies such as *Rabi Jibani* by Prasanta Kumar Pal.

This review of literature would be incomplete without mention of the book *Sharing the Dream: The Remarkable Women of Santiniketan*, edited by Tapati Mukhopadhyay and Amrit Sen.⁴⁵ This is a compilation of essays on the extraordinary women who contributed to Tagore’s educational experiment and helped create the atmosphere that characterized Santiniketan. It is a highly significant volume with essays ranging from “Ashram-janani” (The Mother of the Ashram) on Tagore’s wife, Mrinalini Devi, to ones about Protima Devi, Kiranbala Sen, Jamuna Sen, “Pushpa Labi” (Tagore used this nickname to refer to the eldest daughter of Kshitimohan Sen),

⁴² Kathleen M. O’Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2002), 210.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ajit K. Neogy, *Santiniketan and Sriniketan: The Twin Dreams of Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010), 40-65.

⁴⁵ Tapati Mukhopadhyay and Amrit Sen, *Sharing the Dream: The Remarkable Women of Santiniketan* (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 2016).

Kanika Bandyopadhyay and others. These essays provide valuable information about the unsung roles performed by these women in the success of Santiniketan. The approach of each essay is different owing to the simple fact that they have different authors. The essay on Mrinalini Devi draws heavily from the memorial account of her son Rathindranath Tagore and presents a poignant picture of a maternal soul dedicated to the welfare of the children of the ashram. It highlights the supportive role that she must have played in order for her husband to have embarked upon such a challenging venture. The essay on Protima Devi explores her contribution to the aesthetics of Santiniketan, to Silpa Sadan and, specifically, to the productions of Tagore's dance-dramas. Apart from these two women, the rest did not belong to the Brahmavidyalaya period as they joined the ashram after it had expanded to form Visva-Bharati. The essay on Kiranbala Sen provides an account of this remarkable woman as an artist and maternal figure who acted as midwife to most of the expecting mothers in the ashram as there was no gynecological help accessible in the then-remote location. This particular information is a product of the writer having used memorial accounts as her source material, since it can be found only in Rani Chanda's memoir, *Sab Hate Apan*.⁴⁶ Even Kiranbala's grandson, Amartya Sen, does not mention this remarkable contribution of hers in his autobiography, *Home in the World*, though he discusses her husband Kshitimohan Sen's role in Santiniketan and his writings.⁴⁷ This fact further indicates that memorial accounts cannot be ignored if one has to arrive at a full understanding and appreciation of Tagore's philosophy of education. While the significance of Kiranbala Sen does not apply to the Brahmavidyalaya period, the principle of memorial accounts providing intrinsically important data holds true for the Brahmavidyalaya period as well.

Set in the context of these existing writings on Tagore's ashram and his philosophy of education, this dissertation brings together three elements that have never been studied in conjunction before: an analysis of Tagore's philosophy of school education as reflected in his essays, poetry, drama and fiction, a reconstruction of life at Brahmavidyalaya as derived from memorial accounts, and translations of Tagore's essays specifically on the topic of school education. My study must commence with an understanding of exactly how the Vedas inspired Tagore and for that purpose, the next chapter of my dissertation refers to the Vedas and the *Atharva*

⁴⁶ Rani Chanda, *Sab Hate Apan* (Kolkata: Visva-bharati, 1994), 136.

⁴⁷ Amartya Sen, *Home in the World: A Memoir* (United Kingdom: Allen Lane, 2021), 69-71.

Veda in particular, which provides the maximum amount of information about the Vedic education system.

CHAPTER II

EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN INDIA DURING ANCIENT AND COLONIAL PERIODS

Tagore's ideal of education had a very firm rooting in the system of education that had been practiced in India since the Vedic period. Ancient India had a rich and profound educational process that deeply affected the character of Indians. That system was perpetuated through the centuries, though in forms that had undergone varied modifications owing to religious and socio-political factors that exerted their influence on the sector of education. Tagore's educational enterprise was, in many ways, an attempt to retrace the steps taken by the *brahmachari* as he humbly sought education as the ultimate wealth of life and to recreate the ambience of the *tapovan* and *gurugriha* where education was imparted as a spiritual and holistic practice. It was a desire to return to the cultural roots of Vedic civilization the significance of which can be interpreted as multifaceted amidst the colonized reality of Tagore's India. This desire to return to the Vedic educational practice informed the entire educational enterprise of Tagore. The evidence of this can be found in nearly all the essays where Tagore elaborates on his ideas of education. He constantly uses the instances of the ancient *tapovan* and *gurugriha* as his reference points in order to posit an ideal system of education. Consequently, the guru of the Vedic period becomes, for Tagore, the ideal teacher who nurtured the questioning minds of his students and inculcated within them a spirit of learning that was constant and holistic.

It is this process of learning that Tagore contrasts with the system of education prevalent in his contemporary times that was entirely a product of the colonial masters. Colonial education was devised for serving the needs of the colonizers who were not, in any way, motivated by a selfless instinct of propagating true learning that nourishes the soul and mind of the learner. The infamous English Education Act of 1835, popularly known as Macaulay's Minute, was the origin of the colonial educational philosophy. It formed the backbone of the educational principles that constituted both the syllabi and the mode of learning pursued across the schools of colonial India.

Tagore is emphatic and uncompromising in his pronounced denunciation of that colonial education system. However, his is not a blind denunciation that is led only by passions of patriotic fervour or nationalistic sentiments both of which were so widespread during Tagore's working

life. Rather Tagore presents his arguments in a logical manner in order to critique the prevalent system of education. His arguments are bolstered by a thorough knowledge of ground reality that he displays in his writing. In his essays dealing with the subject of education, he logically exposes the facile nature of colonial education and proceeds to systematically prove how unsuitable that education was for the holistic development of the mind, body and soul of the young Indian student. As he critiques and gives a clarion call to reject the school system of his day, he also proposes an alternative model of education that, he argues, would be far better suited for the proper development of the young learner who he felt was subject to the constant abuse of an education system that was entirely alien to all his sensibilities.

It is this alternate model that found its fullest expression in Tagore's *Brahmacharyashram*¹ that he went to such lengths to establish at Santiniketan and later expanded to form Visva-Bharati, the dearest of all his projects. In order to understand the formative principles of *Brahmacharyashram* and thoroughly comprehend its workings, it is necessary to understand the background that made for its formation and function. This background is chiefly constituted by Tagore's sincere admiration and idealization of the Vedic system of education coupled with his intense and logical disavowal of the colonial education system being propagated in the schools across the land.

Educational System of Ancient India

The educational system of ancient India can be dated back to the Rig Vedic period. Man's curiosity about everything around him formed the basis of Vedic knowledge that was propagated through a pedagogy that was at once spiritual, philosophical and vocational. We get detailed descriptions of that system of education in the two epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as well as in the Vedas, Puranas, and history books.

Over the ages the educational system of ancient India developed two branches—one was the Vedic while the other was the Buddhist. The Vedic system of education concentrated upon the learning of the Vedas, Vedangas, Upanishads and other allied philosophical subjects. The medium of

¹ *Brahmacharyashram* or *Brahmavidyalaya* was the school Tagore founded at Santiniketan in 1902.

instruction followed was Sanskrit. On the other hand, the Buddhist education system, through its learning of Tripitakas and various Suttas, among other subjects, aimed at the attainment of what in Sanskrit was known as *Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* or the perfect ultimate wisdom.² The medium of instruction in Buddhist learning was Pali. There were various features common to the two systems of learning, alongside the obvious dissimilarities. Tagore's chief point of reference is the Vedic education system. He does not specifically refer to the Buddhist system. One can postulate that the cause for this preference arose from the fact that Tagore was a follower of the Brahma dharma of the Brahma Samaj—a spiritual faith that was deeply steeped in the Vedas and Upanishads. His psyche was molded, from his very childhood, by his father, Debendranath Tagore, through the learning of the Vedas and Upanishads. Thus, it was quite natural that Tagore found the Vedic system of education as the chief reference point while positing an ideal system of education for India.

Vedic System of Education

Man's life in the Vedic period and in subsequent traditional Hindu discourse was divided into four clear stages: *Brahmacharya*, *Garhastya*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sannyas*. Alongside this, the entire population was divided into four *Varnas* in terms of one's occupation and position in the social hierarchy, which later rigidified into the caste system. They were, from top to bottom, Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. The members of the three upper *varnas* followed the four-stage life where they entered into *Brahmacharya* at pre-determined ages specific to each *varna*. The period of *Brahmacharya* was the period of learning and disciplining oneself through the practice of abstinence. During this period, young boys would leave behind the comforts of their homes, in order to go and live at a *gurugriha* which was often located in a *tapovan*. The idea of this *gurugriha* and the *tapovan* exerted a powerful influence upon Tagore's imagination as can be testified by his essays on education and his conceptualization of the *Brahmacharyashram*.

² V. K. Maheshwari, "Education in Buddhist Period in India",

<http://www.vkmaheshwari.com/WP/?p=522> (accessed on 17/10/2020, 8:08 p.m.)

The principal source of information about the Vedic practices pertaining to education is the *Atharva Veda*. In the opinion of Radha Kumud Mookherji, the educational system is first adumbrated in the *Atharva Veda* and “First there is the ceremony of Upanayana by which the teacher, acharya, initiates the pupil, brahmachari, into a new life described as second birth, whence he becomes a dvija, twice born.”³ S. C. Sarkar stated that of all the Vedas, the complex *Atharva Veda* appeared to be the most important source for the quest of educational information about very early ages⁴ that is, the earliest dawns of human civilization. It is in the *Atharva Veda* that the spiritual connection between the guru and the *brahmachari* is emphasized and the process of *upanayana* is used as a metaphor for the rebirth of a learner as a pupil of the guru. The *Atharva Veda* states:

The Vedic student was called Brahmacharin and the teacher Acharya. The teacher performs for the pupil the part of a spiritual mother; and by the initiation ceremony the youth is born anew. The teacher receives the Brahmachari as a disciple, he places him as an embryo within; he bears him in his belly for three nights; when he is born the Gods convene to see him.⁵

Thus, by equating the guru with mother, the *Atharva Veda* characterizes the innate relationship between the Vedic teacher and his student where the guru willingly took upon himself the responsibility of not only imparting knowledge but also the overall well-being of his pupil. The *Atharva Veda*, divided into nine books, contains a total of forty-seven hymns of which thirty-four pertain to the process of initiation of the student into the life of a *brahmachari*, ten to the description of the life of a *brahmachari* and finally, three to the completion of student life.⁶

In this context, particular mention may be made of Hymn 10 in Book IV. In the translation of S. M. Rakhe, the seventh verse of the hymn reads: “The bone of the gods turned into pearl, that endowed with soul moveth in the waters. That do I fasten upon thee unto life, strength, longevity,

³ Radha Kumud Mookherji, *Ancient Indian Education* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1947), 26.

⁴ S. M. Rakhe, *Education in Ancient India* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992), 31.

⁵ *Ibid*, 31.

⁶ *Ibid*, 3.

unto a life lasting a hundred autumns, May [sic] the (amulet) of pearl protect thee.”⁷ As Rakhe proceeds to interpret this hymn, he opines, “The Vedic teacher seems to be very much concerned about the well-being and prosperity of his pupil but he is also very much anxious to see that his pupil imbibes qualities like truthfulness etc. as virtues are basic to all prosperity.”⁸

It is this spirit of the Vedic teacher that Tagore wishes to instill in his ideal teacher. In his school, he strived to replace the cane-swinging, irritable teacher of the colonial system—one who was only interested in striking terror in the hearts of his students—with a true guru whose aim would be the holistic development of his students. A detailed discussion on the contrasting characters of the teacher of the colonial school and Tagore’s ideal teacher would be entered upon in the following chapter.

The *Atharva Veda* also allows the reader to understand how the Vedic system of education emphasized the significance of developing strong, healthy bodies as the receptacle of intellectual and spiritual knowledge. Commenting upon Hymn 30 of Book VI, Rakhe states, “The Vedic educator wants to bless his pupil not only with noble qualities but also with physical and material excellence. Strength and prosperity go together. Without strength, where is excellence? Without excellence, there can be no vigour nor heroism.”⁹

This balance between healthy body and sound mind became something that Tagore sought to inculcate in the students of his school. Accordingly, he laid repeated emphasis on the need for physical activity and energetic exertion in his students. A clear demonstration can be found in a letter written to Mohitchandra Sen in 1904:

খুব কসে পরিশ্রম করিয়ে ক্ষুধার মুখে বেশ সাদাসিধা খাবার দিলে সেটা রুচিকর এবং স্বাস্থ্যকর হবেই। পূর্বে ওরা যখন সকালে বিকালে খুব কসে কোদাল পাড়ত তখন খাবার নিয়ে খুঁৎ খুঁৎ করত না এবং মোটা রুটি ও ডাল আশ্চর্য্য পরিমাণে খেতে পারত। ওদের শরীর তখন এখনকার চেয়ে ভাল ছিল। আমার তাই মনে হচ্ছে সকালে কোনো এক সময়ে অন্ততঃ দশ মিনিট কাল সব ছেলেকে মাটি খুঁড়িয়ে নেওয়া উচিত হবে। যাতে সকালে সেটা রীতিমত করে এবং ফাঁকি না দেয় দেখবেন। বিকালে যে সব ছেলে ফুটবল না খেলবে

⁷ Ibid, 7.

⁸ Ibid, 8.

⁹ Ibid.

তাদেরও এই রকম ব্যবস্থা করবেন। বৃষ্টি হলেও বাইরে খেলা বা মাটি খোঁড়া বন্ধ রাখবেন না।¹⁰

[If a rather simple fare is served at the hour of hunger after making them do hard physical work, they would certainly find it palatable and nutritious. Earlier when they used to toil hard at the spade both morning and evening, they were not so picky about food and they could consume plain bread and dal in astonishing quantities. Their health was better then as compared to the present. So, it seems to me that at some point of the morning, it would be right to make the boys do some digging at least for a period of ten minutes. See to it that they do it accordingly in the morning and not worm their way out of it. Make same arrangements in the evening for the boys who would not play football. Do not stop the outdoor games or the digging even if it rains.]

The *Atharva Veda* sets forward the values that the guru aimed to inculcate in his pupils as well as the principal aims of the process of education itself. Vedic education was targeted towards the achievement of the following goals: faith, steadfast wisdom, progeny, wealth, longevity and immortality.¹¹ The nature of these qualities is open to interpretation. The path to the attainment of these goals was three-fold: *brahmacharya*, *dīkṣā* and *tapasyā*. Through a rigorous practice of these three qualities alone could a pupil truly become learned. The very character of what constituted knowledge for the Vedic mind has to be understood in order to systematically approach the Vedic method of imparting education. According to Raimon Panikkar, “the whole Vedic culture continuously emphasized that philosophy must be based on experience; not the empirical experience of the senses but the inner mystical experience or the third eye of knowledge.”¹² This allows the reader to understand that the Vedic education process was oriented around the concept

¹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Chithipatre Bidyālaya Prasanga*, compiled by Gaura Chandra Saha (Santiniketan: Rabindrabhavan, 2000), 38.

¹¹ Rakhe, 12.

¹² Albert Ferrer, “Integral Education in Ancient India: from Vedas and Upanishads to Vedanta” in *International Journal of Research – Granthaalaya*, vol. 6 (Issue 6), June 2018, 282.

<https://zenodo.org/record/1308951#.YEjaXp0zY2w> accessed on 11.03.2021 at 7:23 p.m.

of self-knowledge; it is by knowing one's own self that one can understand one's relationship to the world at large and the consequent duties and responsibilities thereby facilitating the fullest possible development of one's inner potential. It is this quality of the Vedic education system that exerted such a powerful attraction on Tagore's imagination. He was, at the time of conceptualizing his school at Santiniketan, intimately involved with the Swadeshi movement, the crux of which was to realize the true potential of India and the revival of India's cultural roots. So it was a natural connection for him to envision an education system based on the practices and values that are evident from the Vedas, Upanishads and Vedanta. Tagore has not specified any single text as a source of inspiration for him; rather he repeatedly uses generic terms like "Vedic age" and the imagery of the *tapovan* while alluding to the roots of Indian education that he was harking back to. Thus, one can conclude that Tagore was drawing his inspiration from the ideal image of the *gurukul*¹³ system that he had distilled from his study of the Vedas, Upanishads and Vedanta.

Albert Ferrer opines,

After the Vedas, the Upanishads underline the unity of Man and Cosmos, and constitute a profound and sincere research into the nature of Reality. Quite often this research is unveiled through the beautiful dialogue between the master and the pupil, imbued with mutual love and respect, and total freedom of inquiry. Ultimately, Upanishad education is the search for the meaning of Life, and the realization of it for the each one of us. In this genuine pedagogy, self-experience could never be replaced by any teaching coming from outside.¹⁴

A close reading of Tagore's essays like "Santiniketan Brahmacharyashram", "The Problem of Education", "Education of Ashram" would immediately reveal how he was motivated by this spirit of inward inquiry as described by Ferrer to be found in the Vedas and Upanishads. He sought to instil this pursuit of truth into the character of his pupil. In "Santiniketan Brahmacharyashram" (translated as a part of this thesis), as he explains the nature of Vedic education to his pupils, he says,

All the efforts of the entire mind were concentrated only upon acquiring education, searching for truth, only upon suppressing one's ill intents and trying to focus upon

¹³ *Gurukul* refers to the Vedic residential school.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

cultivating one's virtues. ... From today onwards you have vowed to follow the path of truth. Abjure falsehood from your body, mind and words. Firstly, you must submissively devote your mind, intellect and effort to the quest for truth and afterwards, when you realize truth, act upon it and propagate it strongly and fearlessly.¹⁵

The three pillars of Vedic education—*brahmacarya*, *dīkṣā* and *tapasyā*--appealed strongly to Tagore's imagination. He laboured to create a system of education where the pupils would abstain thoroughly from a life of luxury and material comfort and focus entirely on a journey of self-discovery and fulfilment of their potential. In the later years of his life, while addressing the students of Visva-Bharati, Tagore explained the intent behind laying the foundation of his institution at Santiniketan. In his address to the students dated August 1940, he states:

এখানে তখন বাইরে ছিল সব দিকেই বিরলতা ও বিজনতা, কিন্তু সব সময়ই মনের মধ্যে ছিল একটি পরিপূর্ণতার আশ্বাস। একাগ্রচিত্তে সর্বদা কামনা করেছি, বর্তমান কালের তুচ্ছতা ইতরতা প্রগল্ভতা সমস্ত দূর করতে হবে। যাদের শিক্ষাদানের ভার গ্রহণ করেছি, ভারতের যুগান্তরব্যাপী সাধনার অমৃত উৎসে তাদের পৌঁছে দিতে পারব, এই আশাই ছিল অন্তরের গভীরে।

... অবিরত চেষ্টা ছিল সুপ্ত প্রাণকে জাগাবার। তারই সঙ্গে আরো চেষ্টা ছিল ছেলেদের মনে তাদের স্বাধীন কর্মশক্তি ও মননশক্তিকে উদ্ভুদ্ধ করতে। কোনোদিনই খন্ডভাবে আমি শিক্ষা দিতে চাই নি। ক্লাসের বিচ্ছিন্ন ব্যবস্থায় তাদের শিক্ষার সমগ্রতাকে আমি কখনো বিপর্যস্ত করি নি।

সেদিনের সে আয়োজন অন্ধ-অনুষ্ঠানের দ্বারা স্নান ছিল না, অপমানিত ছিল না অভ্যাসের ক্লান্তিতে। এমন কোনো কাজ ছিল না যার সঙ্গে নিবিড় যোগ ছিল না আশ্রমের কেন্দ্রস্থলবর্তী শ্রদ্ধার একটি মূল উৎসের সঙ্গে। স্নানপান-আহারে সেদিনের সমগ্র জীবনকে অভিষিক্ত করেছিল এই উৎস।¹⁶

¹⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanābali*, vol. 14 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1989), 301.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 290.

[Back then, there was scantiness and isolation in every way without but within, there was a reassurance of fulfilment. I have always concentrated on willing that the triviality, the meanness and the impudence of the present times have to be undone. That I guide the ones whose responsibility of education I have taken, to the source of India's nectar of timeless endeavour – was the hope that was at the core of my heart.

...there was the relentless attempt to awaken the dormant life-force. Alongside there was the striving to inspire the abilities of independent action and cognition within the boys. I have never wanted to provide incomplete education. I have never endangered the fullness of their education by adopting the detached system of classes.

The arrangements back then were not dulled by blind ritualism nor were they insulted by the tedium of habits. There was no such action that did not have connection with the main source of reverence that lay at the heart of the ashram. That source had anointed life as a whole with its everyday practices of sleeping and eating.]

Besides the *Atharva Veda*, the *Isha Upanishad* elaborates upon what constitutes knowledge and ignorance and the role they play in human life. The inward journey that Tagore conceptualized education as, can be understood in the light of the definition of *vidya* (knowledge) and *avidya* (ignorance) that one comes across in the *Isha Upanishad*. Stanzas 9, 10 and 11 of the *Isha Upanishad* are as follows:

9. Into a blind darkness they enter who follow after the Ignorance, they as if into a greater darkness who devote themselves to the Knowledge alone.

10. Other, verily, it is said, is that which comes by the Knowledge, other that which comes by the Ignorance; this is the lore we have received from the wise who revealed That to our understanding.

11. He who knows That as both in one, the Knowledge and the Ignorance, by the Ignorance crosses beyond death and by the Knowledge enjoys Immortality.¹⁷

It is this Upanishadic knowledge that Tagore wished to instil within his pupils. It is the lack of this knowledge that would render an individual unable “to enter into harmony and oneness with the universe and a consequent inability to possess and enjoy it.”¹⁸ Vimala Thakar, in her commentary on the *Isha Upanishad*, has suggested that the era of the Vedas and Upanishads was one of absolute freedom between master and pupil, characterized by a profound communion, full of mutual cordiality, love and respect between the two. She also considers it to be a time of total and unconditional freedom of thought.¹⁹ It is this freedom of thought Tagore wanted to facilitate through his education system. Even though Western scholars like E. L. Kemp²⁰ and Charles Boyer²¹ paint an overtly simplified picture of Indian indigenous education and excessively emphasize the role of casteism, A. S. Altekar refutes such criticism by analysing the way the education system changed through the ages and when traced back to the main sources, the Vedas, Upanishads and Vedanta, the issue of caste did not distort the original education system to such a degree as these Western scholars have claimed; freedom of thought was indeed a proud quality that the *gurukul* system of education possessed. Altekar states,

There is a general impression that the Hindu educationalists suppressed personality by prescribing a uniform course of education and enforcing it with an iron discipline. However such was not the case. The caste system had not become hidebound down to c. 500 B. C. and till that time a free choice of profession or career was possible both in theory and practice. Later on when the system became rigid; [sic] the theory

¹⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Isha Upanishad*, in *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 17 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2003), 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 18.

¹⁹ Vimala Thakar, *Glimpses of Ishavasya* (Gujarat: Vimal Prakashan Trust, 1991), 7-8.

²⁰ E. L. Kemp, *History of Education* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1901), 26-27.

²¹ Charles C. Bower, *History of Education* (New York: Charles Scribners', 1919), 22-23.

no doubt was everybody should follow his hereditary profession, but the practice permitted considerable freedom to enterprising individuals, ...²²

It was Tagore's desire to invoke the atmosphere of the *tapovans* that were the loci of the Vedic *gurukuls*. He wished to recreate that ambience where selfless pursuit of knowledge would be possible and students could learn to develop themselves without an eye towards acquiring of degrees. The following chapters would demonstrate Tagore's disdain for the exam-centric approach of teaching students. It was his aim that the pupils of his school would embark on an inward journey just as their Vedic counterparts had done centuries before them. That is why in his inaugural address to the students of his school, he explains to them both the character of the *tapovan* and *gurukul* of the Vedic period as well as what the adoption of *brahmacharya* would signify for them. His explanation is both lucid and apt for the young boys.

That Tagore was also inspired by the description of *gurukul* education as found in various Puranas cannot be ruled out. The word Purana, in Vedic literature, literally signifies "old text". According to Mitali Chatterjee, "The name Purāṇa as a special branch of the sacred literature occurs in the *Atharvaveda*. Purāṇa, as a branch of the Vedic literature is as old as sacred as the Vedic *mantras*, in their Saṃhitā form."²³ Considered in this light, the oldest of the Puranas can be accorded the same validity as the Vedas in their account of the Vedic system of education. The *Vishnu Purana*, dated as having been composed in the third to fourth century A.D. (but narrating events imagined to have taken place at a more ancient time), depicts the *gurukul* life of one of its characters, Prahlada. It is in the *Vishnu Purana* that the reader finds how a pupil was punished for his misdemeanours, as in it one finds the account of Yajnavalkya being punished by his guru Vaisampayana and Yajnavalkya, calmly submissive, accepts the punishment without any hesitation, thereby signifying that the student's position was not one where he could question his guru's judgement or defend his own actions.

The issue of punishment is of particular significance in the context of Tagore's philosophy of education in so far as it was inspired and motivated by the Vedic ideology. That is because Tagore refused to accept the practice of punishing his students in imitation of the Vedic system. He insisted that the student realize his own error and correct himself accordingly. However, this

²² A. S. Altekar, *Education in Ancient India* (Benares: Nand Kishore & Bros., 1944), 12.

²³ Mitali Chatterjee, *Education in Ancient India* (New Delhi: D. K. Agencies, 1999), 11.

ideal situation did not materialize successfully and so the system of student government was introduced at Santiniketan where the body of students judged the errors committed by any student and passed any requisite sentence. An account of the functioning of the student government can be found in the writing of Ajit Kumar Chakravarty²⁴ as well as in the memorial account of Pramathanath Bisi, both of which would be discussed in the following chapters.

However, even though he did not follow the Vedic precedents of punishing his pupils, Tagore did insist on an unquestioning respect and obedience of the students towards their teacher. When he penned what would effectively constitute the first written constitution of the Brahmacharyashram, he specified, “Students need to be indiscriminately reverent towards their teachers. Even if they are unjust, the students would need to bear it submissively without raising any objection.”²⁵ This attitude can certainly be considered as an echo of Yajnavalkya’s deference to his guru.

The *tapovan* was essentially a place that was distinct from the world at large by its atmosphere of spirituality, peace and abstinence from the pleasures of worldly, material life. Located within a forest, it was a space of idyllic living where the occupants were in complete harmony with nature around them. This was the vision that Tagore often alludes to in his essays on education.

The students following *Brahmacharya* would dwell in the house of the guru and aid in carrying out all the household chores that were a necessary part of daily lives. They would serve the guru and his wife, if he happened to have one, completely and without performing this service their education would be deemed as incomplete.

The process of education was a deeply personal one where the mutual relation between the guru and his disciple, the student, would inform the nature of the teaching-learning process. *Sruti* was the chief mode for imparting learning where the guru would speak and the student would listen intently and retain the knowledge within his mind thereby constituting what we now regard as the oral tradition. Initially, the insistence was almost exclusively on the oral transmission of learning where there was no room for writing down the text of the Vedas. The true learning of the Vedic

²⁴ Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, *Brahmavidyalaya* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1951), 28.

²⁵ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14, 301.

mantras, in particular, was considered possible only when the student learnt its correct accent and intonation via the oral method. Radha Kumud Mookherji, in his book *Ancient Indian Education*, writes how the recitation of the Vedic texts was cultivated as an art in itself. He says, “A great value and potency was attached to the very sounds of the letters and syllables by which the sacred words were uttered. Such utterance was not left to mere natural or individual pronunciation but was artificially regulated by metres.”²⁶

Later on, when it became permissible to write down the Vedic texts, it was allowed only as a teaching aid intended for reviewing previous oral instructions. Even when there came the shift to the memorization of various manuscripts, emphasis was laid on how the student critically analysed the memorized text. The process of learning through asking questions, debating and interrogating a topic was considered as the best approach and the guru encouraged his students to be curious in their pursuit of knowledge. Alongside this, *sravana* (listening), *manana* (contemplation) and *nididhyasana* (concentrated contemplation) were necessary methods to be followed for the attainment of *Brahma Vidya* that was to be found in the study of the Vedanta. In fact, the process of learning the Vedic texts by rote did not mean that the memorization was the chief thrust of the educational system. The contemplation and comprehension of the Vedic texts were considered as the ultimate objectives rather than mere mechanical recitation and correct pronunciation, to the extent where one who repeatedly recited the words without any insight into their inner meaning would be regarded as an object of ridicule.

Overall, it is clear that the process of learning involved an active use of the natural intellect of the student. It was clearly a process that did not follow a standardized pattern of book-learning and sitting for examination but one where the student tried to internalize his learning by means of interrogation, contemplation and discussion. The methodology of instruction was one which encouraged an individual and personal engagement with the topics of study, thus making learning a highly subjective process that required both the imagination and the intellect of the individual student. It was, by no means, a generalized decoction forced down the throats of students in general.

²⁶ Mookherji, 26.

The aim of this system was not to make the student knowledgeable about a fixed syllabus but to promote a holistic development of his intellectual, spiritual, philosophical as well as physical faculties. The physical aspect was significant since the students followed a regular practice of yoga and asanas. The young minds were fortified through the practice of meditation. Most importantly, they were encouraged to ask questions, thereby nurturing their natural curiosity and cultivating it so that they grew capable of imbibing knowledge within themselves. Thus, study emphasized

the inner self into the depths of which he can descend by means of contemplation (*svarupanubhuti*), the ideal self that he can discover through intellection (*manana*), and the social self into which the laws of which tradition initiates him. Thus he [the student] devotes himself to the study of the fundamental truths of life and does not care for half-truth and intermediate truths.²⁷

This education is oriented towards the achievement of self-fulfilment and not around the acquisition of mere objective knowledge, thereby concerning itself more with the subject than the object, the inner self than the outer world. Understanding of the Self was of extreme importance in this system. The idea can be easily demonstrated through a quote of Yajnavalkya cited and further illustrated by Hartmurt Scharfe:

Yajnavalkya told his wife Maitreyi that “the Self, my dear, must be seen, heard, considered and meditated upon.” The seeing might refer to a rsi’s vision, the hearing refers to the words of the teacher or the tradition in general, considering includes rational exploration in one’s own mind and in discussion with others, meditation intellectual and emotional internalization.²⁸

This illustration by Scharfe touches upon nearly all the aspects of the methodology followed in the Vedic period for the purpose of imparting education.

Another significant aspect of the Vedic system of education was the practice of *gurudakshina*, considered such an integral part of education that a student, no matter how deeply learned, would be considered to not have completed his education if he failed to successfully offer

²⁷ Ibid, xxii.

²⁸ Ibid, 6.

gurudakshina to his guru. Simply put, *gurudakshina* was the honorarium offered to the guru at the end of one's education for the privilege of having learnt from him. It was not necessarily an offering of money. In fact, there are multiple instances in the *Mahabharata* where the guru asked for a specific action to be carried out by the student for the sake of his guru, in lieu of his *gurudakshina*. The Vedic system of education was not regulated by financial transaction between the teacher and the student, thereby preventing any sort of commodification of education. Tagore, in the initial years of the Brahmacharyashram, did not charge any fees from his pupils. All their expenses were paid by Tagore. It was later when the school was expanded and Tagore's income of Rs. 250, as it was from the Tagore estate, proved entirely insufficient, that the system of monthly fees was initiated. It was a system that was largely based on sincere mutual regard and deep reverence towards the guru by the students, who maintained a constant humility in their behaviour towards the guru.

The end of a pupil's stay in the *gurukul* was marked by the ceremony of *samavartana* that meant "returning home (from the house of the teacher)". The hymns of Book I:30, Book II:29, Book VI:1 and Book XIX:72 from the *Atharva Veda* furnish details of the *samavartana* ceremony where, apart from wishing for the long life and prosperity of the pupil, the pupil achieves completion of his education by offering *dakshina* to the guru.²⁹ Hymn 72 of Book XIX reads: "The unmarried of us seek a wife, the liberal seek a son; may we (two), with uninjured life-breath, be companions ..., in order to what is great, to winning of strength."³⁰ This hymn is indicative of the character of the relationship that the guru and his pupil would build in the course of the student's education and the affirmation of that bond would occur with the recitation of this hymn during the *samavartana* ceremony. This ceremony of *samavartana* was emulated by Tagore when his educational enterprise expanded from the Brahmacharyashram to form Visva- Bharati. Students graduating from Visva- Bharati underwent the ceremony of *samavartana* before entering a new phase of their lives.

²⁹ Rakhe, 37.

³⁰ *Atharva-Veda Samhitā*, trans. by William Dwight Whitney (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, n. d.), 767.

Shift from the system of Vedic Education

The system of Vedic education faced a serious counter with the advent of Buddhism, which offered the general population a philosophy and a way to free themselves of the excesses of the injunctions and restrictions placed upon human life by Brahmanical religion. Buddhism emerged as the great equalizer that broke down the barriers among the four *varnas* prevalent in society. It gave people, irrespective of their social class or caste, the right to uniform education and certainly paved the way for a radical revolutionizing of the educational space that grew far more inclusive than it had ever been in the past.

Buddhism laid emphasis on the attainment of Nirvana as the ultimate goal of education. Most significantly, the Buddhist education system no longer regarded the Vedas, Vedangas or Upanishads as the subject- matter of study. Rather, it concentrated on the Tripitaka and Vinaya and various *suttas* (Pali for sutras).

Under Buddhism the whole system of education underwent a great deal of change as compared to Vedic times. There did remain certain similarities like, for example, the Buddhist ceremony of a student's initiation, *upasampada*, bore resemblance to the Vedic *upanayana*: through both ceremonies, the pupil took the vow of *brahmacharya* and entered the arena of education shunning the temptations of the material world. But the resemblance ends there, since for the Vedic student, his life at the *gurukul* prepared him for the next phase of his life, *gārhastya* or the domestic life, but for the Buddhist pupil going through *upasampada* would signify his having left family life behind him, as *upasampada* could only happen to those taking *pabbajja*, or renunciation of domestic life in order to enter the Sangha. In the initial period of Buddhism, education at the Sangha was attainable only by those who had left all worldly ties behind. However, in later times, the Sangha did open its doors to laypersons as well. An account of the early rules regulating the process of entry into the Sangha is provided by Kanai Lal Hazra:

...after *pabbajja* and a monk observed four *parajikas* and other rules of the Patimokkha after *Upasampada*. He after *Upasampada* was informed about the four great resources (*nissaya*). Then certain rules were introduced into the Sangha regarding its admission. People who were immoral or people who had any liability to the society or to the state were not allowed to join the Sangha. The Buddha also

did not give permission to join the Sangha who [sic] were suffering from bodily defects or diseases etc.³¹

These rules and parameters were starkly different from those of the Vedic *gurukul* system. However, it must be admitted that the Buddhist education system was purely monastic in character. Masih and Vidyapati state in their article on the role of Buddhism in the development of the Indian education system, “The Buddhist world did not offer any educational opportunities apart from or independently of its monasteries. All education, sacred as well as secular, was in the hands of the monks. They had the monopoly of learning and the leisure to impart it. They were the only custodians and bearers of the Buddhist culture.”³²

Tagore’s literary oeuvre is replete with instances that demonstrate the deep reverence that he had towards Buddhist philosophy and the influence it had on him. But nowhere in his writings on an ideal education system does he mention the Buddhist education system as a reference point. In order to understand this recalcitrance, it is necessary to draw the distinctions between the systems of learning. At the very onset, it can be postulated that while the Vedic system initiated the student into the structure of domestic life by means of living and participating in the daily household chores of the *gurugriha* where his spiritual parents, namely his guru and the wife of the guru, occupied the place of his biological parents, the Buddhist system was starkly different as it marked the student’s complete dissociation from domestic life at the moment of his initiation into monastic learning. Tagore’s educational philosophy was one where he laid great emphasis on the positive contribution that a student has to make towards society. The social responsibility of a student is something Tagore valued highly and sought to instil within his pupils at the Brahmacharyashram.³³

Tagore, in both theory and practice, shows a preference for the Vedic structure where the student inculcates within himself values and awareness of duties that would later be his backbone

³¹ Kanai Lal Hazra, *History of Theravāda Buddhism in South-East Asia* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1982), 16.

³² Ankita Masih and Vidyapati, “Role of Buddhism in the Development of Indian Education”, *TechnoLearn* 8(1), June 2018, 23-31.

³³ Chakravarty, 39.

while discharging his responsibilities both as a householder and a citizen. Tagore's ideal student is not one who is detached from worldly existence but one who performs his social role consciously and responsibly—as a part of the domestic order but not deluded by its temptations. This gave him sufficient motivation to select the Vedic system as his model for an ideal education system.

However, this does not imply that the Buddhist system of knowledge was a complete departure from the Vedic knowledge system. In both the systems, a common factor is noticeable as both emphasize the process of education being an inward journey where an individual gains self-awareness and understanding about the relation of the self with the world around. In Buddhist tradition the process of cognition is termed as *Saññā* and a combination of *Saññā*, *Viññāna* (common knowledge) and *Paññā* (wisdom, insight or analytical knowledge) is required in order for perception or knowledge to be complete.³⁴ Of these three, *Paññā* is ascribed the highest esteem as, according to Buddhaghosa, “it might be called intellect ‘at a higher power’.”³⁵ The term *Paññā* has multiple meanings depending upon the context. Rhys Davis elaborates upon the plurality of its meaning:

Nevertheless so protean and flexible is the term *paññā*, that it is used not only for intuitive knowledge, but for any exercise of intelligence, if only that intelligence is being *intelligently exercised*. The synonyms by which it is defined in *Abhidhamma-Piṭaka* embrace nearly every aspect of cognition, from research and analysis to insight.³⁶

The ultimate goal of education in the Buddhist tradition is Nirvana or *nibbana*, the way to which in the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* is described as “a correct view of the real nature of his self” and having attained that, the individual proceeds to

investigate the cause of this “Ego-personality”. He realises that everything worldly, himself not excluded, is conditioned by causes past or present, and that this existence is due to past ignorance (*avijjā*), craving (*taṇhā*), attachment (*upādāna*),

³⁴ Narada Maha Thera, *A Manual of Abhidhamma (Abhidhammattha Sangaha)* (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1979), 106.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 142.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

Kamma, and physical food (*āhāra*) of the present life. On account of these five causes this personality has arisen and as the past activities have conditioned the present, so the present will condition the future. Meditating thus, he transcends all doubts with regard to the past, present, and future (*Kankhāvitaraṇavisuddhi*). Thereupon he contemplates that all conditioned things are transient (*Anicca*), subject to suffering (*Dukkha*), and devoid of an immortal soul (*Anattā*). Wherever he turns his eyes, he sees nought but these three characteristics standing out in bold relief. He realises that life is a mere flowing, a continuous undivided movement. Neither in a celestial plane nor on earth does he find any genuine happiness, for every form of pleasure is only a prelude to pain. What is transient is therefore subject to suffering and where change and sorrow prevail there cannot be a permanent ego.³⁷

It is in this profound approach to knowledge that the Buddhist epistemology does find a legacy in Tagore's philosophy of education, as Tagore too wished to ascribe such an exalted position to knowledge via the system of education he envisioned at Santiniketan. We certainly do not suggest that Tagore wanted to lead his pupils onto the path of Buddhist *nibbana* but he did seek to guide them through a process of education that focused on their self-awakening in order to achieve maximum possible fulfilment of their individual potential.

The Buddhist system of education did not create grounds favourable for an intimate personal relation between the guru and his student that was a necessary condition for the Vedic system of education. The Buddhist Sangha or monastic order was governed by a complex system of hierarchy that was not conducive to the growth of such a teacher-student relationship. If the Buddhist monastic structure can be expressed via the imagery of a many-branched tree, the Vedic structure was one where everything converged into one centre, the guru. But it must be stated here that the Buddhist student was required to serve his guru with as much sincerity and devotion as the Vedic student, without forming any emotional ties. Masih and Vidyapati state, "The student was expected to serve his teacher with all devotion. On rising in the morning the student will arrange everything

³⁷ Narada Maha Thera, 83-84.

for the daily routine of the teacher. He will cook his food and clean his clothes and utensils. Whatever he acquired through begging alms, he would place before teacher [sic].”³⁸

The Maurya, Gupta and Pala periods of Indian history witnessed the continued rise and excellence of the Buddhist education system under the aegis of numerous *viharas* or monastic universities of which the Taxila Vihara, the Nalanda Vihara and the Vikramshila Mahavihara were the most prominent. The fame of the principals of these Viharas like Acharya Shilabhadra and Acharya Atisa Dipankara Srijnana spread across all of Asia. But with the end of the ancient period, and advent of the middle ages of Indian history, under the impact of external aggression that the country faced, these centres of learning slowly dwindled away, marking the end of the systems of education that had illumined the life of ancient India.

Education in Colonial India and Macaulay’s Minute

By the time India was colonized by the East India Company, followed by control passing entirely to the British crown, the indigenous education system of the country had suffered a degradation from the rich tradition of learning that ancient India had albeit the fact that there existed Sanskrit *tols* and *pathshalas* which had attempted to preserve the pedagogy and impart it in rigid and mechanical fashion. There was a severe lack in scientific knowledge and centuries of disregard had rendered the regional languages weak. Sanskrit had been largely replaced by Persian as the language of legal and administrative business. The masses in general were either uneducated or sparsely educated. The great centre of learning that Varanasi once used to be had also degenerated with the ravages of time. Rural India, that contained the bulk of the Indian population, depended upon local *pathshalas* or madrasas for their education. The education there was rudimentary in nature and gave youth no opportunity to develop scientific thinking. Thus, a genuine need to reform and rejuvenate the educational system was felt by great thinkers of the time such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Radhakanta Deb, Rasamay Dutta, among others in Bengal. As a result,

³⁸ Masih and Vidyapati, 25.

institutions such as the Hindu School (later the Hindu College) and the Sanskrit College were established in Calcutta.

In 1813, through the enactment of the Charter Act of 1813, the East India Company was compelled to accept the responsibility of introducing a state education system for the benefit of the Indian population. Resultantly, between the years 1813 and 1857, the Company set up a number of schools and colleges that constituted the foundation of English education in India. When T. B. Macaulay set foot on India in 1834, he was appointed as the President of the General Committee of Public Instruction and went on to produce the infamous “Macaulay’s Minute” in 1835 that determined the very nature of the education system of colonized India. Thus, a close study of Macaulay’s Minute is essential both for the comprehension of the prevalent system of education in Tagore’s days as well as to identify precisely which elements of that system were detrimental to the purpose of a complete education. In his essays Tagore shows himself as a trenchant critic of colonial education that he felt only led to the malnourishment of the mind and body of the Indian student. The fundamental causes of Tagore’s discontent can be traced by a close inspection of Macaulay’s Minute that was instrumental in the formation of colonial education as the foundation to the Englishmen’s civilizing mission.

Macaulay begins his writing with a complete and thorough dismissal of those whom he calls “supporters of the old system”, in other words, anyone who had spoken in favour of retaining Sanskrit, Arabic or Persian as the official language of instruction.³⁹ To him, these languages seemed as irrelevant to the modern context and usage as the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt. His vehemence on the issue is so intense that he goes to the extent of comparing the use of Sanskrit or Arabic as the medium of instruction with the founding of a sanatorium on unhealthy ground, thereby defeating the very purpose of it. Thus, from the very onset, he shows a complete lack of respect for indigenous culture alongside a thorough lack of interest in knowing it better. His racial

³⁹ Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Macaulay’s Minute on Education”, 2 February 1835, <http://home.iitk.ac.in/~hcverma/Article/Macaulay-Minutes.pdf> (accessed on 17/10/202-, 8:25 m.), 1.

insularity imbibes almost every word with such a sense of cultural superiority that any learning of Indian origin is not only dismissed but treated as entirely useless and nonsensical.

Macaulay writes, "...to talk of a Government pledging itself to teach certain languages and certain sciences, though those languages may become useless, though those sciences may be exploded, seems to me quite unmeaning."⁴⁰ He proceeds to dismiss the Indian languages spoken across the land as too weak to carry the weight of knowledge, thereby making English the solitary sane choice as the language of instruction. He unflinchingly states, "I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit [sic] or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value."⁴¹ This sentence instantly provokes the modern reader to question how Macaulay could form such a correct estimate of two ancient languages, each of which possesses a vast corpus of literature, grammar and history besides being repositories of cultural knowledge handed down through generations, without knowing a single letter of either language. The chief problem with the infamous Minute lies in the fact that it is based on the idea of "the intrinsic superiority of the Western literature."⁴² It eradicates any possibility of the Indian student being nourished by native soil and water by proceeding to unhesitatingly proclaim that neither Arabic nor Sanskrit, in the field of poetry where their excellence is supposed to be highest, could hold a candle to European poetry, and the overall poverty of these languages is so severe that "It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all books written in Sanscrit [sic] language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England."⁴³ Such uninformed assessment reeks of the ignorant self-importance of the colonial master. Macaulay establishes the inevitability of English learning at the cost of a complete debasement of all indigenous systems of learning which he uncompromisingly ridicules. It is hard to imagine the development of anything constructive that would be conducive to indigenous welfare, out of the cesspool of such cultural abuse and linguistic insult.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 2.

⁴¹ Ibid, 3.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

What the Minute completely ignored is the fact that the structuring of education in a manner so foreign to the sensibilities of the Indian student would entirely alienate his milieu from his study, thereby rendering him unable to relate anything in his lessons with his lived reality. Simultaneously, this formative document, by its attitude of thorough denigration of the Indian systems of knowledge, paved the way for the future educated colonized man to regard his own culture as inferior and unworthy of any possible consideration. The colonial enterprise of education set off with the patronizing spirit that anything worthy of regard as knowledge was inevitably Western and anything that originated in the East had no right of claiming to be a part of the knowledge system. This approach is evident not only in Macaulay's Minute but also in Charles Grant's earlier proposal for reform where he declared, "The true cure of darkness is the introduction of light. The Hindoos err, because they are ignorant: and their errors have never fairly been laid before them. The communication of our light and knowledge to them, would prove the best remedy for their disorders ..."⁴⁴

This attitude stemmed from an unflinching sense of superiority and was based on a rigid hierarchy of the racially superior master and the culturally inferior native. The difference between the spirits of Macaulay's Minute and Grant's proposal lies in the fact that Grant's ideas issued from a sense of doing welfare to the native population whereas Macaulay's official report vehemently denounced all indigenous systems of knowledge with the aim of supplanting them with English education. Both documents espoused the cause of Western intellect and English education but the Minute managed to be extraordinarily offensive towards cultural sensibilities. There are sources that clearly state that, in spite of the decline of Indian systems of education since the ancient period, there indeed existed cultivation and dissemination of learning in the country before the introduction of English education. One such source was the writing of James Keir Hardie, who stated:

Max Muller, on the strength of official documents and a missionary report concerning education in Bengal prior to the British occupation, asserts that there were then 80,000 native schools in Bengal, or one for every 400 of the population. Ludlow in his history of British India says that "in every Hindoo village which has

⁴⁴ B. D. Basu, *History of Education in India under the Rule of the East India Company* (Calcutta: The Modern Review, n.d.), 60.

retained its old form but I am assured that the children generally are able to read, write and decipher, but where we have swept away the village system as in Bengal there the village school has also disappeared.”⁴⁵

This is a clear testimony to the impact of colonization upon the indigenous systems of education. Furthermore, reading education in the pre-British Deccan area, Elphinstone, in his 1824 “Minute on Education”, wrote:

The great body of the people (of the Deccan) are quite illiterate: yet there is a certain class in which men capable of reading, writing and instructing, exist in much greater numbers than are required, or can find employment ...The present abundance of people of education is owing to the demand there was for such persons under the Maratha Government.⁴⁶

Both the references constitute a clear indication of the change wrought upon the fabric of Indian educational life by the radical shift in the political reality of the country.

In his Minute, Macaulay cites the low sales of Sanskrit and Arabic books as reason enough to stop the printing of books in those languages altogether. He terms the attempts made by the colonial government till that time, of financing the printing of books in the two languages, providing stipends to students studying at various Sanskrit colleges across the country and Mahometan College as well—in short, any measure taken by the government to perpetuate learning in the Indian tradition, as “bad practice”. He minces no words in expressing the thought that “English is better worth knowing than Sanscrit [sic] or Arabic” and thereby recommends the immediate closure of “the Mudrassa and the Sanscrit [sic] College at Calcutta”. He considers it a tremendous act of benevolence on the part of the government to allow the functioning of the Sanskrit College of Benaras and the Mahometan College of Delhi without the provisions of any stipend whatsoever: “If we retain the Sanscrit [sic] College at Bonares [sic] and the Mahometan College at Delhi we do enough and much more than enough in my opinion ...”.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁷ Macaulay, 9.

At this juncture, it is necessary to mention that critical commentators such as J. P. Naik and Syed Nurullah have divided the British approach towards Indian education into three schools of thought. The first one followed the ideas of Warren Hastings and Minto who had opined in favour of encouraging the study of Sanskrit and Arabic and educating Indians in Western science and knowledge in general through the medium of these languages. This thinking earned support from a group of older officials of the Company in Bengal. The second school espoused the ideas of people like Elphinstone and Munro who advocated the propagation of education through modern Indian languages as the best possible medium of knowledge reaching the mass of Indian population. The third school of thought that would have the final word was the one which argued strongly for the dissemination of Western knowledge through English, most pronounced in Macaulay's Minute.

We get a revealing glance at the most popular educational ideology of the times through a diary entry by H. T. Princep, who was the Secretary to the Government of Bengal in the Education Department. He writes:

There was, however, a class of Anglo-Indians, and the younger civil servants mostly joined it, who were opposed to Government's assisting to give instruction in any kind of Eastern literature or science, the whole of which they declared to be immoral, profane or nonsensical. They especially attacked the Sanskrit mythology and in this they were aided of course by the missionaries, but the use of Persian in our courts and in the correspondence of our Governor-General was also an object of their antipathy.⁴⁸

It was thus the most conducive climate for the acceptance of Macaulay's recommendation that entirely foregrounded English education at the cost of Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian and all Indian languages. However, a significant area where the Minute varies from the spirit of the earlier documents dealing with the matter of the education of the Indian populace is that most of them had adopted the stance of enlightened beneficiaries acting in the interest of the natives for their moral and intellectual upliftment. Macaulay's Minute, on the other hand, clearly addressed what

⁴⁸ Basu, 86.

would serve the interest of the colonial masters the best and aid them the most in their shouldering of the burden of the white man. The most frequently quoted lines of the Minute need to be referred to here: “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern,—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”⁴⁹ It is a clear instance of the desire for intellectual and cultural colonization that would, by degrees, render the Indian student incapable of forming a true idea of his own culture, let alone respect its nuances, history or languages. That this problem was to have far-reaching consequences is evident from the fact that decades later, Lajpat Rai, while analysing the problem of education under the Raj, observed,

Under no circumstance must we allow our people to think of themselves in terms of self-depreciation, nor can we allow the foreigners to condemn us on racial grounds or assume our cultural inferiority. We must keep our heads erect, and must continue to cultivate self-respect and self-confidence in ourselves and to instil them in our boys and girls.⁵⁰

This concern about racial condemnation and the sense of natural inferiority made him assert, in his 1920 book *The Problem of National Education in India*, that Indian culture has no need to be ashamed in front of the world.⁵¹ But the seeds of the shame were sown quite effectively by Macaulay. The Minute ends with the most vehement denunciation of the prevalent governmental policy of encouraging the learning of Sanskrit and Arabic languages and printing books in those languages as Macaulay states that if this state of affairs is allowed to persist then the actions of the Committee would not only be useless but “positively noxious”.⁵²

The entire responsibility of the direction that the colonial education system adopted cannot be laid at the doors of Macaulay’s Minute presented by the Committee of Public Instruction, since he was not the originator of the school of thinking that was crying for the abolition of the Indian

⁴⁹ Macaulay, 8.

⁵⁰ Lajpat Rai, *The Problem of National Education in India* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1920), 73.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 72.

⁵² Macaulay, 9.

systems of learning and replacing them with English education. That school had existed since the time of Charles Grant. However, Macaulay's Minute did effectively cement the official position by ending the three-way educational controversy that had existed in colonial India since 1813. Its outcome was manifold. Firstly, English was conclusively deemed as the sole capable medium of instruction. Secondly, though no Indian educational institution was closed down or stipends of existing students or teachers discontinued, an embargo was placed on providing stipends to any new student seeking education in the Indian branches of learning as well as the appointment of new teachers once the teachers teaching those subjects had left their positions. Thirdly, it was made no longer permissible to use any portion of government funds for the purpose of printing what were considered Oriental works. The fourth and the final provision directed that funds, the expenditure of which was the subject matter of the rumination of the Committee, would be entirely engaged in imparting the knowledge of English literature and science through the medium of the English language.

Even though, some years later, Lord Auckland sanctioned the grant of Rs. 31,000 per year for the purpose of what was considered Oriental learning, the above-mentioned principles became the guiding lights of the education system in colonial India, and it was this system that Tagore critiques in his writing, as we shall substantiate in later chapters, and sought to supplant through his educational enterprise at Santiniketan.

Tagore's desire to overhaul the entire education process of India stemmed directly from his own personal experience that he underwent as a schoolboy. Under the system of education imposed by the colonial education policy, Tagore vehemently states that he never forgot what he himself had to endure as a boy. He gives the most vivid description of the impact it had on him in the essay "My School":

...men's children have to be banished from their paradise into a realm of death, dominated by the decency of a tailoring department. So my mind had to accept the tight-fitting encasement of the school which, being like the shoes of a mandarin woman, pinched and bruised my nature from all sides and at every moment. I was fortunate enough in extricating myself before insensibility set in.

Though I did not have to serve the full penal term which men of my position have to undergo to find their entrance into cultured society, I am glad that I did not

altogether escape from its molestation. For it has given me knowledge of the wrong from which the children of men suffer.⁵³

The imagery and the comparisons that Tagore draws here are graphic enough to insist upon the horror that the colonial school held for him. Firstly, he regards the entry of a child into school as an entry into the realms of death. That in itself is a sufficient statement about the soul-killing nature of the education that a student was subjected to. Even though the description is tempered by Tagore's characteristic wit and lacings of irony, one cannot escape the gruesome picture of the physical torture of foot-binding being used to depict how the colonial school education choked and sought to deform the mind of the student and Tagore's fortunate escape from it. Tagore treats the tenure of education as an inescapable prison term that is inevitable for achieving the permit to pass into the gates of cultured society and it gives the reader an idea of how despondent the situation must be where a child has to undergo a process that was no less cruel than actual physical torture in order to be regarded a member of cultured society in due time.

He further describes his own extremely unhappy engagement with school that he identified as a soul-deadening process in these words:

It could not be possible for the mind of a child to be able to receive anything in those cheerless surroundings, in the environment of dead routine. And the teachers were like living gramophones, repeating the same lessons day by day in a most dull manner. My mind refused to accept anything from my teacher. With all my heart and soul I seem to have repudiated all that was put before me. And then there were some teachers who were utterly unsympathetic and did not understand at all the sensitive soul of a young boy and tried to punish him for the mistakes he made. Such teachers in their stupidity did not know how to teach, how to impart education to a living mind. And because they failed, they punished their victim. And this was how I suffered for thirteen years of my life.⁵⁴

⁵³ Tagore, "My School", in *Personality* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 142.

⁵⁴ *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. 3, 346.

In this vehement denunciation of the schoolteachers of his time, Tagore clearly reveals their failings that could in no way contribute to the proper education of a child. He blames the lack of real and lively engagement that caused the child to receive bookish knowledge like an unintelligible burden which the child did not know what to do with. He criticizes those teachers for the lack of sympathy in their approach and orientation that prevented the formation of any human bond between the teacher and the student. Furthermore, he cannot accept the complete inability as well as the lack of interest that those teachers had in understanding their pupils. Tagore insists that the child mind is sensitive and demands a suitable treatment but the teachers had no capacity of understanding it or acting in accordance with their pupil's sensitive soul. Tagore profoundly analyses the psyche that led to the rampant and unthinking chastisement of schoolboys and says that the teacher feels his own lack and failure and makes the student the target of his displaced aggression.

In his essays, Tagore notes that the teachers who served in the colonial schools were products of the colonial school system themselves and thus had only half-baked knowledge at their disposal that they had never truly internalized. They could not possibly impart true knowledge unto their students as they themselves were not truly educated. All they had were degrees that they had achieved from passing examinations by dint of their rote-learning.

The unhappy engagement between the student with the teacher of the colonial school is testified by Abanindranath Tagore as well in his memorial accounts. Abanindranath Tagore, in *Jorasankor Dhare* (জোড়াসাঁকোর ধারে), narrates his own experience as a schoolboy where he was punished by a teacher whose knowledge of English pronunciation left much to be desired and yet he chose to chastise Abanindranath, his pupil, for what happened to be the latter's correct pronunciation.

ক্লাসে ইংরেজির মাস্টার আমাদের পড়ালেন p-u-d-d-i-n-g- পাডিং। আমার মাথায় কি বুদ্ধি খেলে গেল, বলে উঠলুম, "মাস্টারমশায়, এর উচ্চারণ তো পাডিং হবে না, হবে পুডিং..." মাস্টার ধমকে উঠলেন, "বল্ পাডিং।" আমি বলি, "না পুডিং।"... শাস্তি দিলেন

চারটের পর এক ঘণ্টা “কনফাইন”...ঘরে ঢুকে বললেন, “বলতেই হবে তোকে পাডিং...” বলে সপাসপ জোড়া বেত লাগালেন পিঠে। বেতের ঘায়ে পিঠ হাত লাল হয়ে গেল...⁵⁵

[The English teacher taught us in class p-u-d-d-i-n-g, “paading”. I don’t know what occurred to me—I said, “Sir, it would not be pronounced ‘paading’, it would be “pooding ...”. The teacher rebuked me, “Say paading.” I said, “No, pooding.”... He punished me to be confined for one hour after four ... he entered the room and said, “You have to say paading ...” and he started vigorously caning my back. My back and palms grew red from the caning ...]

This graphic description is sufficient for us to understand the teacher’s complete unfitness for this job which is not because of his incorrect pronunciation but owing to his despotic insistence on passing on his inaccurate knowledge unto his student and resorting to torturous methods to do so. This narrative is of singular importance as it allows us a glimpse at the general character type of the colonial schoolmaster who was neither sufficiently educated him nor had the compassion and understanding that should be necessary elements of a teacher’s character. Thus, it is no wonder that Tagore was so vehement in his insistence upon the inadequacy of the prevalent teachers. Not only here but in the essay “*Shikshār Herpher*” (শিক্ষার হেরফের), Tagore further analyses the underlying cause that was leading to the formation of sub-par teachers. He states that the teachers themselves are unable to negotiate their way through the vagaries of the English language and since English was the medium through which all education reached them, their education was at best half-digested by them. Tagore insists that the English learnt by Indians in the colonial school was so scant and so flawed that it was not capable of bearing the weight of the amount of information that was crammed into the student minds. It was only sufficient for managing to carry out one’s tasks in some office. Equipped with that very education, the degree-holders ascended to the post of schoolteachers and proceeded to compromise the young and impressionable minds with their handicapped knowledge.

...নীচের ক্লাসে যে- সকল মাস্টার পড়ায় তাহারা কেহ এন্ট্রেন্স পাস, কেহ-বা এন্ট্রেন্স ফেল, ইংরেজি ভাষা ভাব আচার ব্যবহার এবং সাহিত্য তাহাদের নিকট কখনোই সুপরিচিত নহে।

⁵⁵Abanindranath Tagore, *Jorasankor Dhare* (Kolkata: Visva- Bharati, 1944), 14-15.

তাহারাই ইংরেজির সহিত আমাদের প্রথম পরিচয় করাইয়া থাকে। তাহারা না জানে ভালো বাংলা, না জানে ভালো ইংরেজি; কেবল তাহাদের সুবিধা এই যে, শিশুদিগকে শিখানো অপেক্ষা ভুলানো ঢের সহজ কাজ; এবং তাহাতে তাহারা সম্পূর্ণ কৃতকার্যতা লাভ করে।⁵⁶

[Of the teachers who teach in the lower classes, some have passed their Entrance Examination while some have failed it. English language, thoughts, customs or literature—none of it is familiar to them. They are the ones who first introduce us to the English language. They know neither good Bengali nor good English; their only convenience is that it is much easier to make the children forget rather than to make them learn and they carry out this function with complete success.]

Tagore's principal criticism against the colonial education system is the artificial and mechanical character of the process. He repeatedly emphasizes how, by being removed from all subjective quality and human connect, the prevalent education was merely superficial and failed to reach into the souls of the students. It formed only a burden that the student needed to struggle to carry; it failed to be a strength that would nourish the inner being. The student could never consider his learning as a natural development of the capacities that were already latent within him. Rather, his school-learning was thoroughly an external imposition that dissociated him from all natural tendencies thereby preventing education from being an inward journey. Resultantly, the student acquired only rote -learning but there occurred no true understanding that would make knowledge truly a part of the individual and aid him in forming his own perspectives. Tagore illustrates this point in his characteristic style in the essay “অসন্তোষের কারণ” or “The Cause for Disquiet”:

এত কাল ধরিয়া ইংরেজের স্কুলে পড়িতেছি, কিন্তু ছাত্রদশা তো কোনোমতেই ঘুচিল না। বিদ্যা বাহির হইতেই কেবল জমা করিলাম, ভিতর হইতে কিছু তো দিলাম না... ভয়ে ভয়ে ইংরেজের ডাক্তার ছাত্র পুঁথি মিলাইয়া ডাক্তারি করিয়া চলিল, কিন্তু শারিরবিদ্যায় বা চিকিৎসাশাস্ত্রে নূতন তত্ত্ব বা তথ্য যোগ করিল না।⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 6, 564.

⁵⁷ *Rabindra Rachabali*, Vol. 16, 298.

[we have been studying at the school of the Englishman for such a long time but in no way did our state of studenthood come to an end. We only accumulated the learning externally but gave nothing from within ... the medical student groomed by the English kept practicing his medicine with fearful caution but failed to add any new idea or information to physiology or medical science]

Tagore illustrates how the same was the case with other professions, such as that of engineers. He makes it evident by his arguments that the kind of training that the Indian student received from his schooldays made him thoroughly unfit for any independent thinking and since only independent thinking, rationalizing and analyzing power can lead any individual towards discovery or innovative ideas, the Indian student was by default incapacitated from doing so.

Tagore refuted the belief that the Indian population had truly imbibed the learning of Western sciences that had been such an emphatic concern for the colonial educator since 1813. The cause being the lack of mental connect with the subject of study. What the Indian student had acquired were degrees in Western science but not internalized understanding of the workings of science. Thus, in his behavioural life, he continued to followed practices that were replete with superstition or pseudo-scientific reasoning. In the essay “শিক্ষার সার্ঙ্গীকরণ” or “The Internalisation of Education,” he clearly states:

কিন্তু সায়ান্সে- গড়া পাশ্চাত্যবিদ্যার সঙ্গে আমাদের দেশের মনের যোগ হয়নি;... সাধারণের কথা ছেড়ে দেওয়া যাক, সায়ান্সে ডিগ্রি- ধারী পণ্ডিত এ দেশে বিস্তর আছে যাদের মনের মধ্যে সায়ান্সের জমিনটা তলতলে, তাড়াতাড়ি যা-তা বিশ্বাস করতে তাদের অসাধারণ আগ্রহ, মেকি সায়ান্সের মন্ত্র পড়িয়ে অন্ধ সংস্কারকে তারা সায়ান্সের জাতে তুলতে কুণ্ঠিত হয় না।⁵⁸

[But there has been no mental connect between our country and the Western education constituted by science ... let alone common people, there are plenty of degree-holding scholars of science in this country whose scientific foundation is shaky; they have extra-ordinary interest in quickly believing in nonsense and feel

⁵⁸ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 16, 340-341.

no shame at raising blind superstition to the level of science under the mere garb of pseudo-science.]

Thus, Tagore correctly identified the weakness that underlay the foundation of the colonial education that in turn prevented the character of the student from being properly formed. He opines that there was a complete absence of a chemical harmony between all the education that was heaped upon an individual's mind for the first two decades of his life and his lived reality, thereby rendering the education facile.

While the freedom movement was in full swing, Tagore raised the highly significant question about the mandatory learning of the English language that the Indian student had to bear. When any free country would choose to educate her citizens in her own language, Indians, even while struggling to attain independence, were learning, thinking and expressing through English. Rather than internalizing education, the larger section of Indian students were tussling with the grammar and spelling of a language that was not their own at the cost of neglecting their own mother tongues. Their understanding was crippled as the knowledge of every subject was filtered down through a language whose nuances and functioning were alien to them. The irony was not lost on Tagore of the political situation where a freedom struggle went hand in hand with the evaluation of a person's merit to both his countrymen and the colonial master lying in his English knowledge. It is an issue to which he returns again and again in a number of his essays: "শিক্ষাসমস্যা" (The Problem of Education), "ছাত্রবৃত্তির পাঠ্যপুস্তক" (Textbooks for *Chhatrabritti*), "শিক্ষার সার্ঙ্গীকরণ" (The Internalization of Education), among others. To Tagore, the issue is not just a political one but one which affected the development of the mind of the child-learners and one that became the chief obstacle in the path of their proper comprehension of anything they learn. English figured in the child-imagination as a terrific figure of an ogre who threatened it into submitting thoroughly to the process of mechanical memorization. Understanding the English language seemed like an impossible challenge and the student responded by his attempt to memorize each and every thing without any comprehension thereby creating such immense foundational weakness in his construction of his intellect that his lifelong learning persisted in being unsound.

Tagore explains the challenge to comprehending the lessons in English thus:

এক তো ইংরাজি ভাষাটা অতিমাত্রায় বিজাতীয় ভাষা...হয়তো কোনো-একটা শিশুপাঠ্য রীডারে haymaking সম্বন্ধে একটা আখ্যান আছে, ইংরেজ ছেলের নিকট সে-ব্যাপারটা অত্যন্ত পরিচিত, এইজন্য বিশেষ আনন্দদায়ক; অথবা snowball খেলায় Charlie এবং Katie র মধ্যে যে কিরূপ বিবাদ ঘটিয়াছিল তাহার ইতিহাস ইংরেজ-সন্তানের নিকট অতিশয় কৌতুকজঙ্ক, কিন্তু আমাদের ছেলেরা যখন বিদেশী ভাষায় সেগুলা পড়িয়া যায় তখন তাহাদের মনে কোনোরূপ স্মৃতির উদ্রেক হয় না, মনের সম্মুখে ছবির মতো করিয়া কিছু দেখিতে পায় না, আগাগোড়া অন্ধভাবে হাতড়াইয়া চলিতে হয়।⁵⁹

[Firstly, English as a language is extremely foreign ... It might be so that a children's Reader has a tale about haymaking—the subject is very familiar to the English boy; or a snowball fight between Charlie and Katie can be highly humorous for an English child but when our boys read all this in a foreign language, they cannot associate it with any memory of theirs nor can they visualize it. They have to grope entirely in the dark.]

Tagore's philosophy of education has sometimes been regarded as abstract, or even naïve owing to the fact that Tagore's recognition has largely been as a poet and not as a social reformer and in context, the words of Alex Aronson are relevant. He states,

Tagore was no professional educationist. All his pronouncements on education start with the assumption that education is not a profession, but an art. He himself came to education by way of his poetry. Intuition and experience rather than scientific investigation showed him the need for educational reform. It was the poet in him that demanded a creative approach to childhood. In other words, only as a creator, a dreamer, and by no means as a psychologist or a sociologist, did Tagore attempt to turn educational practice into a meaningful process leading to successful integration of the individual in society.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 6, 563.

⁶⁰ Alex Aronson, "Tagore's Educational Ideals", *International Review of Education*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (1961), 385.

While Tagore's poetic self being evident in his educational enterprise is not contested, Aronson's critique of it being entirely the product of dreamer's ideation is both unfair and unfounded. Tagore's idealism did not remain confined to the domain of abstraction. Rather Tagore developed a distinct philosophy that he translated into action through the founding and running of his school that would later grow into the larger entity of a university – Visva- Bharati. Tagore focused his attention on every aspect of education conveyed in both Brahmavidyalaya and later Visva- Bharati. As the scope of this dissertation is the Brahmavidyalaya period, I would analyse how Tagore did so in the Chapters 3 and 5. Tagore's essays outline the principles upon which his school was founded and what he recommended for the overhauling of the education system of colonized India. In the process, Tagore was envisioning a new swadeshi samaj and conceptualizing the Brahmavidyalaya as an alternative to the colonial machine called school. Tagore was aiming to create social independence via his educational enterprise as he felt political independence would not suffice for the upliftment of India. Tagore sought to identify the source of strength for India and invoke that strength for invigourating the Indian society. He states, “কোথায় আমাদের বল, আমাদের প্রকৃতির স্বাভাবিক গতি কোন্ দিকে, তাহা বাহির করিতে হইবে। তাহা বাহির করিতে হইলেই নিজেকে যথার্থরূপে চিনিয়া লইতে হইবে।”⁶¹ [We need to identify the source of our strength and where the natural bent of our character lies. To do so, we have to reach the true understanding of our selves.] By using the Vedic model as his inspiration for his Brahmacharyashram, Tagore was invoking the inherent strength of Indian civilization and positing it against the colonial education system. Tagore's approach was one where he attempted to decolonize the Indian mind from the socio-cultural dependence that had been drilled into it by the colonial school. Tagore's principal focus was on the cultivation of knowledge – an action that was entirely absent in the mechanical education of the colonial school. Tagore elaborates this idea in an essay where he describes the main purpose of his university, Visva- Bharati but the principle holds true for his philosophy of education in general. He writes, “শিক্ষার প্রকৃত ক্ষেত্র সেইখানেই যেখানে বিদ্যার উদ্ভাবনা চলিতেছে। বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের মুখ্য কাজ বিদ্যার উৎপাদন, তাহার গৌণ কাজ সেই বিদ্যাকে দান করা। বিদ্যার ক্ষেত্রে সেই-সকল মনীষীদিগকে আহ্বান করিতে হইবে যাঁহারা নিজের শক্তি ও সাধনা-দ্বারা অনুসন্ধান আবিষ্কার ও সৃষ্টির কার্যে নিবিষ্ট আছেন।”⁶² [The real space for education lies where

⁶¹ *Rabindra Rachanabali* vol. 6, 704.

⁶² *Rabindra Rachanabali* vol. 14, 243.

innovate learning exists. The principal duty of a university is the cultivation of knowledge; its secondary purpose is the dissemination of that knowledge. Those great men who are engaged in the cause of investigation, invention and creation by dint of their own capacity and endeavour, should be summoned to the field of knowledge.] By stating this, Tagore is clearly emphasizing on a kind of learning that is self-aware and thus holds the ability of self-empowerment. Uma Das Gupta asserts how Tagore's educational mission was to create a school that was truly Indian in character:

He did not seek the government's favour for education, sanitation, peace, order and justice. He was embarrassed to find that even the movement for an Indian 'renaissance' sought the British government's intervention to remedy the imperfections of Indian society. ...The Santiniketan education was an experiment to bring about cultural understanding and unity at two levels: first, between the urban and the rural through education in the mother-tongue, and learning about each other's skills; second, between India and the West through exchange of knowledge, and recognition of each other's contribution to civil society.⁶³

Following this argument, it can be posited that Tagore's educational enterprise, far from being a poetic dream, was an expression of Tagore's own brand of postcolonialism. That postcolonialism was not as nuanced or matured as postcolonialism of the present day but Tagore's thought and action were postcolonial nonetheless. In the opinion of Abhijit Sen, "Rabindranath emerges with a postcolonial paradigm of learning for the emergent nation. ... Tagore's approach is not only postcolonial but can even be regarded as what is now known as postnational."⁶⁴

⁶³ Uma Das Gupta, "In Pursuit of a Different Freedom: Tagore's World University at Santiniketan", *India International Centre Quarterly* vol.29, no. 3/4, 33.

⁶⁴ Abhijit Sen, Keynote Address to Refresher Course (lecture, University of Calcutta, March 2, 2022).

CHAPTER III

TAGORE'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

An once truant turning schoolmaster, entirely for choice, may be a strange phenomenon, but this is what happened here. Rabindranath, or Gurudeva, as so many called him, played truant in his school-days. When, however, he developed his own school it was one from which no child would run away.¹

This excerpt from Jnanendranath Chattopadhyay's essay "Rabindranath and His Ashrama School", by mentioning the apparent contradiction of the truant turning into not only a schoolmaster but the founder of an entire educational institution and emerging as the Guru, is actually an indicator of the cause-effect relationship that underlay Tagore's educational enterprise. Having known the misery of the being subjected to the colonial school system, Tagore developed the most intense dislike for the mechanical nature of the prevalent schools that churned out boys with degrees like the most efficient factory. He grew to despise how the colonial school system worked hard at suppressing all that came spontaneously and naturally to the child's nature. The helplessness of young students in the face of the ogre of English education is something he insistently points out in almost all his essays on education. He admits that the lacunae in the school education, its great pitfalls and ultimately its sheer futility—all appeared in a more pronounced form before him when he first started to teach his own children.²

A number of writers who have made a close study of Tagore's educational philosophy and practices have laid forth reasons that motivated him to start his Brahmacharyashram at Santiniketan. They are all unanimous in their opinions that the primary factor of his engagement with the field of education was deep dissatisfaction with the prevalent system. Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee, in his detailed study of Tagore as an educationist, states:

We may take into account several other factors that may have been instrumental in drawing Tagore to the field of education. In the first place, like all philosophers and reformers, Tagore was a great believer in the value of education

¹ Jnanendranath Chattopadhyay, "Rabindranath and His Ashrama School", in *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly: Education Number Vol. XII*, ed. Kshitis Roy (Santiniketan: Visva- Bharati, 1947), 10.

² Maitreyee Devi, *Mongpote Rabindranath* (Calcutta: Mitra o Ghosh, 1943), 94.

as the most fundamental pre-requisite of the progress of a nation in any direction. Secondly, the contemporary educational conditions in the country called for urgent reforms, as there had been hardly any substantial improvement in the educational system since Wood's Despatch [sic] of 1854.³

Alongside this, the ideological and socio-political climate of the times also had a significant role to play in Tagore's ideation of an education system that would cater best to the Indian sensibilities. The rise of Swadeshi and Tagore's active involvement in the national movement was also instrumental in driving his desire to formulate an education system that would take the country back to its roots and help in stating clearly that India does not have to rely solely on borrowed ideals from the West. Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, who was the first writer in documenting the history of the first eleven years of the Brahmacharyashram, opines:

... আসল কারণটা ছিল স্বাভাবিক – আত্মপ্রতিষ্ঠার আকাঙ্ক্ষা। পশ্চিমেই যে সব আছে, সে যে সর্ববিষয়েই আমাদের গুরু ও প্রভু – এ কথাটা সবলে অস্বীকার করিবার ও ইহার উলটা কথাটা বলিবার একটা জেদ তখন শিক্ষিত সমাজে প্রকাশ পাইতেছিল। সেটা স্বদেশীর পূর্বরাগ।⁴

[... the actual reason was natural – it was the desire for establishing one's selfhood. That everything worth having lies with the West and the West is our lord and master in very sphere—the educated section of the society was revealing a determination to disavow this statement powerfully and state the opposite of it. It was the early music of Swadeshi.]

That Ajit Kumar Chakravarty is accurate in identifying the general mood of the country is testified by the various educational enterprises that appeared as the result of the National Education Movement that started taking place in Bengal from the last decade of the nineteenth century. In 1890-92, Gooroo Dass Banerjee, the first Indian Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta,

³ Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness??: A Study of The Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962), 24.

⁴ Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, *Brahmavidyalaya* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1951), 11.

publicly criticised the English education system while delivering his convocation address.⁵ Tagore, too, in 1892, read his essay “*Sikshar Herpher*” at a public meeting in Rajshahi and it was in this pioneering essay that he called for the need of vernacular education at the elementary level. In 1895, Satish Chandra Mukherjee, in collaboration with Romesh Mitter, started a school called Bhagavat Chatuspathi in Calcutta; the school was modelled on the *tois* or Sanskrit schools of ancient India. Mukherjee, the founder-editor of the *Dawn* magazine, in 1898 wrote in his magazine:

Foreign education has failed to produce original men amongst us. Foreign education has not enabled us to be self-reliant, self-dependent, self-sacrificing, patriotic. The present system of mere examinations has failed to bring to the front the stamp of men who can hold their own in the great industrial struggle which is the marked feature of the great civilisations amidst which we live.⁶

These very years (1892-1900) witnessed the publication of a number of Tagore’s essays on the topic of education—be it on the nature of school textbooks, the prevalent practice of teaching child-morality, or the need of Bengali education for Muslim students. It would go on to become his lifelong passion that he would give shape to through his school at Santiniketan and later expanding the enterprise to form Visva-Bharati. The essay “*Shikshar Herpher*” is of particular significance as it lays forward the pivotal ideas about education that would remain at the heart of Tagore’s educational philosophy throughout his life. Kathleen M. O’Connell lists these ideas as follows:

1) The necessity for education in the mother tongue; and the need for that language to be expanded and developed to a level where it can facilitate thought and express the cultural ethos: 2) the need for shaping a curriculum which is in touch with its Indian surroundings, 3) the destructive potential of an educational system geared to narrow pragmatic ends that thwart a child’s capacity to think, feel and imagine; and, conversely the power of joyful, open-ended learning to

⁵ Kathleen M. O’Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2012), 87.

⁶ *Dawn*, Feb. 1898, in *The Origin of the National Education Movement*, 7.

remove learning barriers and assist the child to discover, absorb and develop fully.⁷

This can be taken as a succinct summary of the guiding principles that characterized Tagore's philosophy of education as well as the application of the same to his Brahmacharyashram. Tagore's dynamic mind was constantly active in experimenting with new techniques of tutoring his pupils as well the finding the most conducive way to facilitate their true development. His mental horizon stretched to encompass all minutiae involving the process of an ideal school education from obvious issues such as the necessary reading materials and course of study to discipline in cases of misdemeanour and daily activities from waking up to going to bed and pleasurable pursuits.

Thus, in order to achieve a systematic understanding of the whole process, there is the need to view each aspect individually even though all of them collectively give us the full picture of what Amartya Sen calls "an imaginative and innovative system of education" and how "through his [Tagore's] writings and his influence on students and teachers, he was able to use the school as a base from which he could take part in India's social, political and cultural movements."⁸

Characteristics of Tagore's Education System

Tagore established the sheer futility of the "knowledge" that had become a meaningless burden for Indian students rather than fortifying their intellect or characters in any way whatsoever. The root cause of this soul-consuming practice of education is identified by him as the removal of the child mind from Nature and the instinctive education that Nature imparts to the child mind. In Tagore's philosophy of education, Nature plays the most significant role in the formative years of a student's life when his mind is full of innate curiosity. Tagore understands the desire for freedom in the child's mind: a freedom from convention and social restrictions, and the freedom to try and know the workings of Nature instinctively through his own contact with Nature. Tagore's approach runs contrary not only to the prevalent model of education but even to the systems of learning that

⁷ Kathleen M. O'Connell, 101.

⁸ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 91.

we presently propagate in our country, as he opposes the idea of trying to concentrate the child mind on specific topics rather than allow a free play of it to enjoy the surprises that sudden new discoveries would hold. So instead of a forced concentration of the mental faculties of students, Tagore wishes that the mind be set free to be dispersed and find its own nutrition from conducive places. He writes, “The Schoolmaster is of opinion that the best means of educating a child is by concentration of mind, but Mother Nature knows that the best way is by dispersion of mind ... Facts must come fresh to startle their minds into full activity.”⁹ Rather than letting the child mind find its food fresh through being allowed to roam free in Nature, the colonial school served enormous and obligatory helpings of stale facts that caused natural aversion in the student.

This emphasis on the role of Nature is an element that grows in significance since Tagore first conceptualized his Brahmacharyashram, the working principles of which were laid down by him in a twenty-page letter written to a teacher of the school, Kunjalal Ghosh, dated 13 November 1902. This letter can be regarded as the first constitution of Brahmacharyashram. This constitution does not emphasize the role of Nature in education to the extent that Tagore came to do later in his life. In her analysis of this letter, Kathleen O’Connell observes: “... there is little indication of some of the features which would later characterize Santiniketan. Nature as an educational force, for example, is given only a few lines in paragraph 61 which discusses the role of birds, animals and gardens in the ashram.”¹⁰ But later on, involvement with Nature became a primary aspect of Tagore’s education practice. He insisted on the active participation of pupils in engaging with Nature while they received their lessons in subjects such as Geology, Chemistry, Entomology or Ornithology. Tagore had faith in Nature’s ability to foster and develop the characteristic curiosity of the child mind that was being exposed to the wonders of the world for the first time. He believed that the mechanical education of the colonial school choked that questing spirit and the sense of wonder and awe that a child naturally possesses when his mind is first exposed to the infinite possibilities of the universe. He thus encouraged a mode of education where the pupils would directly come into contact with Nature and acquire knowledge about its workings, not from mere

⁹ Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. 4, ed. Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), 346.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 146.

book-learning but from their first-hand experiences. There are a number of contemporary records that attest to this method of imparting education. Elmhirst writes:

Geology becomes the fertility of the plot; chemistry the use of lime and manures of all kinds of spray and disinfectants; ... entomology the control of plant pests (ants, caterpillars, beetles) and diseases (leaf curl, wilt, bacterial attacks); ornithology, the study of birds in their relation first to the garden plot and to the world in general.

There is no room in Siksa-Satra for Nature-study as an abstract project, divorced from life and needs of life.

... the child has to face ... the forces of Nature which attack his trees, his plants and his livestock. Nature-study is thus transferred into the study of Nature in relation to life and daily experiences of life.¹¹

Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyaya describes how he used to conduct his classes at Santiniketan in a manner that brought the students into direct contact with Nature:

শিশুদের ভূগোল শিক্ষা ও প্রকৃতি পর্যবেক্ষণ প্রায় একই সঙ্গে চলিত...আমি ছাত্রদের লইয়া শান্তিনিকেতনের নিকটস্থ খোয়াই-এ গিয়া স্রোতধারা, দ্বীপ, অন্তরীপ, মালভূমি প্রভৃতি দেখাই। বর্ষার জলস্রোত চলিয়া গেলে এখানকার খোয়াই এর বালুর উপর লোহার কণা দেখা যায়, সে-সব ছাত্ররা সংগ্রহ করে। মৃত্তিকার নানাপ্রকার ভেদ দেখাই। ছাত্ররা আশ্রমের গাছপালা পর্যবেক্ষণ, ঋতু পরির্তন লক্ষ করে এবং খাতায় সংক্ষেপে লেখে। কোনো ছাত্র সংগ্রহ করে গাছের পাতা, ফুল, কাঁটা; সেই-সব সাজাইয়া তার প্রদর্শনী হয়।¹²

[Geography lessons and Nature study of the students were mostly conducted in conjunction ... I take the students to the Khoyai near Santiniketan and show them the flow of water, island, cape, plateau etc. Once the monsoon water recedes, one can find iron particles in the sand of the Khoyai here; students collect all those

¹¹ L. K. Elmhirst, *Rabindranath Tagore: Pioneer in Education* (London: John Murray, 1961), 73-74.

¹² Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyaya, *Santiniketan--Visvabharati* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2000), 90.

particles. I demonstrate various kinds of soil to them. The students observe the plants and trees of the ashram as well as the changing of seasons and make brief notes of them. Some students collect leaves, flowers, thorns; exhibitions are arranged for all those things.]

Contemporary writers like Mohit Chakrabarti have emphasized upon how Tagore sought to locate the greatest teaching force in Nature and entrusted his pupils to the guidance of Nature that he considered to be full of joy and vibrant with life. Chakrabarti opines, “Tagore also urges on managing education in such a way as to uphold the infinite spirit of adventure and curiosity alive and alert in the midst of a natural and joyful atmosphere of thrilling education where Nature becomes the guide, guardian and angel of each learner’s heart.”¹³

True education, as Tagore theorizes, would be one where education becomes a part of one’s inner being, strengthens character and aids in the formation of perspectives of the world. And that education is only possible where there is a true blend between the varied nature of topics studied and liveliness in the mode of teaching. For the sake of achieving this liveliness, the source of education needs to be human rather than the mechanical degree-holding teacher who spends no effort in connecting subjectively with each of his students on an individual basis and, rather, supplies them with readymade instructions that are generalized with no heed to the particular needs of each student. In Tagore’s philosophy, it is the failure of the teacher and the education system when the student wishes to run away from a school that inspires no curiosity or desire for learning within him. Instead, the soul-deadening burden of facts and figures that was heaped upon the student’s psyche successfully managed to destroy his natural curiosity as well. The tradition of murdering the student’s questioning mind was handed down from generation to generation and it was so firmly grounded that when Tagore started his school, the students clearly displayed the lack of a curious mind as their natural faculties had been so effectively conditioned by generations of repression. In 1918, the Technical Department was set up at Santiniketan and windmills were imported from America to be installed at the ashram. But once they were set up, very few students took any interest in the working of the windmills that were so new to them. In his 1936 essay

¹³ Mohit Chakrabarti, *Management Education and Rabindranath* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2007), 49.

“আশ্রমের শিক্ষা” or “The Education of the Ashram,” Tagore writes, “একবার আমেরিকা থেকে জল-তোলা বায়ুচক্র আনিয়েছিলুম। আশা ছিল, প্রকাশ এই যন্ত্রটার ঘূর্ণি পাখার চালনা দেখতে ছেলেদের আগ্রহ হবে। কিন্তু দেখলুম অতি অল্প ছেলেই ভালো করে ওটার দিকে তাকালে। ওরা নিতান্তই আল্গা ভাবে ধরে নিলে, ওটা যা-হোক একটা জিনিস, জিজ্ঞাসার অযোগ্য।”¹⁴ [I had once procured a windmill for pumping water from America. I had hoped that the boys would be interested in the mechanism of the immense turbine. But I observed that only a few boys really looked at it. They casually regarded it as something or other—not worthy of questioning.]

It was as if the prevalent school education had managed to condition the student mind into simply memorizing mechanically what was obligatorily fed to them without any capacity to analyze or interpret that information. So, their minds, bereft of the application of their natural faculties of understanding, interpretation and interrogation, had become acclimatized to accept whatever was presented to them. Tagore significantly draws the distinction between true learning and tutored knowledge, where the mind does not imbibe the tutored knowledge that is propagated through notebooks because Indian students could not relate, in any fashion, with the knowledge that were being piled on them through book-learning.

The educational crisis of India was intensified by the fact that the stream of learning that had flowed from ancient India had been choked by the sands of the colonial system which made education the domain of a select few. Those select few, who grew up in the ambience of colonial education, were forever parted from Indian sensibilities as their heart and intellect were effectively shaped to identify only with colonial values. The final product emerging out of the factory called the colonial school was neither an Englishman nor an Indian. It was a curious and artificial amalgamation of facts and figures that outfitted the product to be only an adequate servant to the colonial master with no ability to do, create or function independently. Thus, the colonial school had attacked the very core of India. By modelling the Indian psyche in a way that was distinctly unIndian, it was eradicating the possibility of development of fertile ground for germination of anti-British thoughts that may lead to any anti-colonial action.

Tagore’s identification of this process of ideological colonization is highly instrumental in his envisioning of an educational framework completely Indian in spirit. He did so by trying to

¹⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanbali* vol. 16 (Kolkata: Visva- Bharati, 2001), 350.

retrace the steps of Indian civilization to its Vedic roots and reclaiming the system of education that had existed in Vedic India. This reclamation of India's cultural past can be interpreted as a postcolonial enterprise that he had engaged in during the heydays of the British empire. India's nationalist movement was already creating awareness within India to value all things Indian. While Tagore had a complex relationship with the very concept of nationalism and the idea of the modern nation-state as testified by his book *Nationalism*, his desire to return to the Vedic roots of Indian education was informed by the awareness that education needs to be much more than a series of facts, figures and information for the student mind to grapple with. Instead, it should be a process that would enable the student mind to commune effectively with the world around him. In order to achieve that sort of communication, the mind needed the strength to question, to seek and imbibe learning as an organic process that Tagore believed was possible only via a return to the system of ashramic education that had existed in Vedic times.

However, it would be dilution to state that Tagore wanted to duplicate the Vedic system of education in its entirety. While it is indeed true that in the initial stages of formulating his philosophy of education, he indeed leaned heavily on the Vedic model, it also needs to be emphasized that his approach did not remain unchanging over the years. There is a trajectory to the development of Tagore's educational philosophy; if the early stages witnessed a clear veneration and attempt to remain faithful to the Vedic model, with the passing of years, Tagore introduced highly significant modifications that added a different dimension to his philosophy. The active inclusion of performing arts—music, dance and theatre—was an element that came to strongly characterize Santiniketan's education system in the later years; it was entirely Tagore's addition to the Vedic model that he had built his school on. Moreover, the great importance that he laid on the involvement of his pupils with nature was also something that grew in significance over the course of years. So it would not be inappropriate to state that Tagore, throughout his life, implemented at his institution ideals that were his creative interpretation of the Vedic education system rather than effecting an identical copy.

A closer inspection of this trajectory would be possible if one analyses what can be considered the first constitution of the Brahmacharyashram and how there came modifications and additions to it with the passage of time. Kathleen O'Connell, citing Tagore's biographer Prabhat

Kumar Mukhopadhyay, writes, "... the letter served as the first constitution of the school and remained in effect for much of its first decade."¹⁵ She further records,

There was no written constitution at the opening of the Brahmacharyashram, and the first known written statement of the school's operations did not come until almost a year later, in September 1902. This statement, in the form of a letter to one of the teachers, Kunjalal Ghosh, was given to Kshitimohan Sen in 1908 by Rabindranath, when he asked to see a statement on the ideals and operation of the school.¹⁶

This letter has been translated as part of the essay "*Santiniketan Brahmacharyashram*" included in this thesis. In accordance with *Rabindra Rachanavali* vol. 14, it has been translated with the caption "Primary Working Principles". While most of the principles stated in the letter held true through the course of years, Tagore, with the mind of a poet that was both imaginative and aesthetic, incorporated changes in the running of his school. Those changes rendered his educational experiment of further interest as they freed his school from what could have been a strict and regimented modelling of the pupil into a brahmachari and allowed his education system to focus fully on the development of the full potentials of individual students. That Tagore aimed at helping each individual pupil realize his own potential is an aspect strongly emphasized by Sunil Chandra Sarkar who, in his analysis of Tagore's educational philosophy, compares his ideas with those of Rousseau and Dewey and writes:

There is a striking resemblance between Dewey and Tagore in the sharp insight and discrimination that each evinces in selecting and using from the total contribution of his forerunners just the right ideas and suggestions that he needed. ... One can see, for instance, how in his notion of education as growth Dewey adapted the idea which Rousseau expressed in these words: "All men being equal, their common vocation is the profession of humanity; ... Let him first be a man, he will on occasion as soon become anything else...". Tagore has not only accepted this notion, but widened it: "The best function of education is to enable us to realise that

¹⁵ Kathleen M. O'Connell, 127.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 108.

to live as a man is great, requiring profound philosophy for its ideal, poetry for its expression and heroism in its conduct.”

... So, none of them hesitates to give the pupil freedom – no matter what his aptitudes and interests. “Let each pupil realise his own possibilities” – this and this alone is the expectation.¹⁷

It is in this spirit of freedom coupled with a real desire to create a new system of education focused on the needs of individual pupils that Tagore went beyond the initial boundaries and strict framework of the Vedic gurukul that Brahmacharyashram was founded upon. That Tagore’s mind was entirely occupied by the ideal of the ancient brahmachari is something we can note from the numerous mentions of the same in a number of letters written by Tagore in 1902. A good example can be the letter written to Brajendra Kishore Debbarma on 7 April 1902; “আমি ভারতবর্ষীয় ব্রহ্মচর্যের প্রাচীন আদর্শে আমার ছাত্রদিগকে নির্জর্জনে নিরুদ্ধেগে পবিত্র নিশ্চলভাবে মানুষ করিয়া তুলিতে চাই – তাহাদিগকে সর্বপ্রকার বিলাসী বিলাস ও বিলাতের অন্ধমোহ হইতে দূরে রাখিয়া ভারতবর্ষের গ্লানিহীন পবিত্র দারিদ্রে দীক্ষিত করিতে চাই।”¹⁸[I want to raise my pupils in a pure and unadulterated manner, at a place free from crowds and anxiety, following the ancient Indian ideal of brahmacharya. Abjuring all kinds of foreign luxury and blind admiration of the English, I want to indoctrinate them in the spotlessly pure Indian ideal of poverty.]

Here, it is noteworthy that Tagore’s approach is entirely passionate as he upholds ancient India as a site for ideal education and upbringing. One can even go to the extent of saying that Tagore here is more emotional than practical and rational in his approach. He does not entertain the possibility of there being any lacuna in the ancient Indian education system. He is impelled by a nationalist fervour that is powerfully inspiring but not calmly neutral. Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee analyses the background of Tagore’s fascination with the Vedic model and states:

Like many others, Tagore also engaged himself in the deep study of India’s past cultural heritage. His poetical works of this period (1896-1901), namely *Caitāli*,

¹⁷ Sunil Chandra Sarkar, *Tagore’s Educational Philosophy* (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 1961), 68.

¹⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, *Chithipatre Bidyālay-Prasanga*, ed. by Gourachandra Saha (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 2000), 12.

Kāthā, Kāhini, Kalpanā, and Naivedya, and his prose writings mainly constituting a series of significant articles contributed to *Vaṅgadarśan*, new series, especially during 1901-93 ... bear eloquent testimony to this tendency of interpreting and glorifying India's past history and culture. Along with many illustrious contemporaries sponsoring the Neo-Hindu Movement, which was a spirited offshoot of Indian Renaissance, he also came to find in the ideals of Ancient India a grand binding principle to unite and consolidate into one nationhood the numerous divergent races, sects and creeds inhabiting the vast sub-continent of India.

... The forest life of Ancient India, as he could visualize and understand through Sanskrit Literature and the Hindu Scriptures, with its ideal of simplicity, dignity, and discipline, sublimated through contact with wild nature and natural life, won his warm admiration and allegiance, and, as we shall presently find, offered him the ideal pattern of atmosphere and traditions wherein to conduct the education of children.¹⁹

Tagore's ideation was definitely under the heavy influence of nineteenth-century Hindu nationalism and revivalism. But, once in application, the pitfalls of the systems started making their presence felt. There was a real danger that what aimed to be a lofty ideal would fall prey to what Sunil Chandra Sarkar describes as "orientalism, Sanatani Hinduism, pastism, ritualism or to any such limited aim and thus effectively exclude the universal element that he sought."²⁰ Tagore was also quick in understanding how a great ideal can degenerate under the influence of rigid, ritualistic practice and he wasted no time in pruning any person or practice from his Brahmacharyashram if they showed symptoms of such narrowness. This point will be discussed in detail in Chapter IV. However, it has to be stated here that Tagore's adaptation of the Vedic model underwent numerous modifications after the initial stage of a reverent mimesis of it executed in Brahmacharyashram. One clear example of this kind of a modification can be cited in the medium of language chosen for instruction. Tagore championed the cause of the vernacular as

¹⁹ Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee, 24.

²⁰ Sunil Chandra Sarkar, *Tagore's Educational Philosophy* (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 1961), 148.

a medium of instruction, as one can clearly note from his essay *Siksar Herpher*. But he also wanted to enable his pupils to connect with the wider world. With such an aim in mind, even though the medium of instruction at Brahmacharyashram was Bengali, when his institution expanded to form Visva-Bharati, Tagore adopted English as the linguistic medium at the college level. This modification allowed students from outside Bengal to be educated at Visva-Bharati avoiding the language barrier.

Tagore thus indicates the need of education being adapted to its context and being a process that caters to the needs of those who are accessing it. The most contextual education system for India, he feels, can be created by invoking the system that had produced such excellent results in ancient India. In Tagore's philosophy, education is best acquired where the learning is mediated via human touch than being mechanically served. In ancient India, the subjective system of learning passing from guru to *shishya* thus became Tagore's ideal. The process involved the subjective participation of the student and the teacher where knowledge was impersonal but the process of imparting it was not so. Tagore derides the education system where it seems that the student seeks knowledge from a machine rather than from a person. The subject learned was tempered and coloured by the individual perception and experience and that was characterized the *parampara* or tradition of the guru and *shishya*. The efficacy of that system stands vindicated at present by dint of its continuation in the arena of Indian classical music even today.

Tagore, however, does not call for a complete imitation of the Vedic ashram as that would be neither practical nor possible. The principal hindrance to such complete imitation would be the fact that we have no clear picture of the Vedic *tapovan* available to us; what we have is an outline of the system. Moreover, Tagore acknowledges that a mechanical copying of the ages past would only lead to a superficial process. Rather, he calls for emulating the ideals that had once made the Vedic education system a success. Tagore does not want Indians to indiscriminately return to the *varna* system or the four stages of human life that had governed man's existence during the Vedic period. He does not want the modern student to live the life of the Vedic *brahmachari*. His is the desire to imbibe in learning the ideals that had constituted the education process in the *gurukul* of ancient India.

Thus, Tagore interprets the concept of *brahmacharya* and the life in the *gurugriha* for the modern man. It is that interpretation that was embodied in Tagore's school at Santiniketan. He

states that as per popular understanding, *brahmacharya* might signify a state where an individual follows a life shorn of all material comforts, but such an idea is not the crux of *brahmacharya*. Rather, it is aimed at safeguarding the young hearts, minds and instincts from the waves of worldly existence that they are unprepared for. It seeks to concentrate the mind on its goal and shield it from “প্রকৃতির অকালবোধন এবং বিলাসিতার উগ্র উত্তেজনা”²¹ [premature initiation of human nature and the intense headiness of luxury]. Here, through his reference to luxury, Tagore is signifying anything that would be in excess of basic needs of a student. Thus, Tagore’s interpretation of the stage of *brahmacharya* becomes his guiding principle while formulating the characteristic feature of Brahmacharyashram.

In his school, he wanted students to live a life of simplicity where they would have scant access to material comforts and implements to ease their life. The intention behind this principle is easily understood; Tagore wished to ensure that his students were not pampered and cushioned from the reality of existence and that their want of means and material comforts would encourage them to be innovative and think of ways to fulfil their needs with the limited resources available to them. The education of the ashram was targeted not at making the students experts at book-learning but at making them into complete human beings prepared to take on the challenges of real life. Tagore criticizes colonial education for that fact that it left the students completely unfit in both mind and body, thereby rendering them weak in the battle of existence. He expresses his discontent about how the colonial school paid no attention to the development of the bodies of its young students, resulting in their lack of physical strength and vitality. Tagore’s ideal education leaves the student to build both his mind and body in the heart of nature where the curious workings of nature would fortify his mind and his exploration of the world of nature would strengthen his body. Thus, he wanted as little external paraphernalia as possible when he started the Brahmavidyalaya as he wanted the education of his students to be a holistic process. He gave them limited means but he opened their imaginations and encouraged them to think innovatively.

Tagore believed that the stage of development of the child mind requires plenty of room in order to expand and by determining the child’s fate through the rulings of institutionalized education, the growth of the child mind is severely limited. He emphasizes with the child who wants to gather knowledge of the world as naturally as pigeons pick peas. He questions

²¹ Ibid, 579.

passionately whether the prevalent system of education sought to punish the child for his natural state of ignorance: “শিশু যে অ্যালজেব্রা না কষিয়াই, ইতিহাসের তারিখ না মুখস্থ করিয়াই মাতৃগর্ভ হইতে ভূমিষ্ঠ হইয়াছে সেজন্য সে কি অপরাধী?”²² [Is the child guilty for having been born without learning algebra or memorizing the dates of history right from mother’s womb?]

This rhetorical question is an indication to the unrealistic burden of expectation laid by society and the prevalent system on the tender shoulders of a child that, in turn, effectively crushed all his natural joy and inquisitiveness. Tagore thus insisted that the child mind requires ample amount of freedom so that it can explore its surroundings and discover for itself the various phenomena that the world has to offer. Education, in Tagore’s opinion, should be the means to inspiring that questioning spirit and encouraging the desire of. Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee describes Tagore’s approach thus:

Tagore also recommended Nature’s method of discipline, which he termed as “freedom cure,” as far more effective for moulding character than the stereotyped method of discipline adopted at an average home or school. Though similar in essence to the doctrine of discipline by natural consequences, as formulated by Rousseau and, later, developed by Spencer, it is more human in spirit and touched with greater sympathy for the erring child than is evident in the approach of the former two educationists. “When mind and life are given full freedom,” Tagore observed, “they achieve health. I adopted the system of freedom cure, if I can give it the name ...”²³

The context of freedom can be suitable to introduce another aspect of the educational policy adopted at Santiniketan: discipline. Ever since its inception, the school witnessed a dichotomy in putting into practice two principles of discipline and freedom. This point is further elaborated in Chapter V where the daily working of the ashram is detailed. But it has to be mentioned here that the authorities at Brahmacharyashram were ever torn about the implementation of what seemed two opposing ideals. While Tagore wanted to provide his pupils with a lot of freedom, many faculty members wanted to enforce a strict code of conduct and a highly disciplined manner of

²² Ibid, 581.

²³ Kathleen M. O’Connell, 126.

living that, by its rigid nature, went against the very spirit of Tagorean freedom. Alex Aronson describes the demands of discipline as follows:

But the ever growing industrialisation and mechanisation of life in the West made it impossible for them to put into practice what they all considered to be of pre-eminent importance. Childhood became more and more divorced from nature, and the training of a healthy emotional life was replaced by rigid codes and regulations, by a ‘discipline’ which killed all individual idiosyncrasies and self-confidence in the bud.²⁴

Throughout the developing stages of Brahmacharyashram and Visva-Bharati, these two principles were pitted against each other; even though discipline had its share of supremacy for certain periods of time, it was eventually freedom that managed to make its presence felt in an overarching manner to the ashramites. The details of how this conflict was played out are furnished in Chapter V.

Tagore’s school became, for him, the most conducive environment to put to application the ideas that germinated in his mind while running the school itself. Thus, it can be said that the development of the school and the development of Tagore’s philosophy of education were a symbiotic process where each was dependent on the other for complete realization. The premise of his educational philosophy that was first presented to the general population via the essay *Sikshar Herpher* or “The Lack of Cohesion in Education” remained the same, but the practical implementation of it evolved through the course of time and finally, in 1921, the *Viswa-Bharati Bulletin*²⁵ No. 8 published a three-fold aim for Tagore’s institution and those aims may be regarded as a highly concise and apt expression of the philosophy that had motivated the foundation of the institution:

To concentrate in Santiniketan, in the midst of the Ashrama Vidyalaya, the different cultures of the East, especially those that have originated in India or found shelter in her house:

²⁴ Tanayendranath Ghose, “Rabindranath’s Contribution to Education in India”, in *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*: Education Number Vol. XII, 33.

²⁵ Certain older versions of *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* use the spelling “Viswa.”

To lay in Sriniketan the foundations of a happy, contented and humane life in villages: and finally,

Through the Viswa-Bharati as a whole, to seek to establish a relationship between East and West, to promote inter-cultural and inter-racial amity and understanding and fulfill the highest mission of the present age—the unification of mankind.²⁶

These aims point towards the desire of reestablishing the sense of cultural pride that had faced major decline in the East, alongside expecting a positive practical outcome of the educational venture of Santiniketan through Sriniketan helping in the building of self-sufficient rural economy. And finally, there existed the aim to usher a new era where cultural supremacy and racial superiority would be challenged by “inter-cultural and inter-racial amity and understanding”.²⁷ While Tagore’s fundamental faith in the efficacy of the Ashram system determined the course of his educational venture, he did not wish to foreground the Vedic model over the Western model as a counter-cultural challenge. It is here that Tagore moved away from the first constitution of Brahmacharyashram, where he displayed a desire to remain as faithful as possible to the Vedic model. But as Tagore’s global vision grew in extent and profoundness, it broadened the scope of his educational enterprise and it grew, as O’Connell calls it, “From Forest Hermitage to Global nest.”²⁸ The descriptive term “Global Nest” is certainly influenced by the motto of Visva-Bharati: *yatra visham bhavati eka needam*, signifying “where the world meets in one nest”. The enterprise drew upon the excellence of both Eastern and Western intellect to create a culture of synergy that would be, first and foremost, governed by the sense of humanity. As Tagore’s school—that opened with just five students—grew, he sought out some of the best minds from both East and West to teach his students, thereby creating a set-up where Indian scholars like Kshitimohan Sen and Bidhushekhari Shastri taught alongside European scholars like Sylvain Lévi and Igor Bogdanov. The character of the education was thus informed by a liberal spirit that fostered attempts of taking the best from each culture without discriminating among them. It saved Tagore’s philosophy from being lopsided or hypocritical, where Indian culture would be upheld as the sole model of

²⁶ Ibid, 20-21.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kathleen M. O’Connell, 126.

excellence in response to the colonizer doing the same with his culture. How the process of learning at Santiniketan effortlessly spanned cultures is captured in the writing of Amartya Sen, himself having been a student at Santiniketan:

... there was something remarkable about the ease with which class discussions could move from Indian traditional literature to contemporary as well as classical Western thought, and then to the culture of China or Japan or elsewhere. The school's celebration of variety was also in sharp contrast with the cultural conservatism and separatism that has tended to grip India from time to time.²⁹

Tagore successfully avoided the lure of seeking cultural hegemony by his attempt to seek harmony and mutual respect for all cultures through his effort of trying to know the cultural other better.

The result of all these innovative practices that were so alien to the experiences of Tagore's countrymen was that they found a near complete lack of acceptance and understanding. They were mostly regarded as manifestations of a poet's romantic ideations which had little or no practical value. The colonial education had already made such successful and deep inroads into the psyche of the education-seeking populace that any alternative was regarded as unnecessary and ineffective. What Tagore was attempting to create was a holistic form of education that would address every aspect of an individual's entity and would aid in the formation of a complete human being, and the ways he adopted were considered ineffective in producing future prospects for students. In fact, the larger part of intelligentsia regarded Tagore's methods with a sense of suspicion as they had much greater faith in the colonial education to which they had grown acclimated. The reception of Tagore's educational enterprise has been summarized by Heerendranath Dutta in his book *Sāntiniketāner Ek Jug* (শান্তিনিকেতনের এক যুগ):

... দেশের লোক সেদিন একে সহজভাবে গ্রহণ করতে পারে নি। এর কারণ শিক্ষা- প্রতিষ্ঠান বলতে আমরা যে স্কুল কলেজ বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় দেখে অভ্যস্ত সে তুলনায় শান্তিনিকেতন বিদ্যালয় এবং পরবর্তীকালের বিশ্বভারতী ভাবে- স্বভাবে, রীতিপদ্ধতিতে এতই ভিন্ন প্রকৃতির যে তা অনেকের পক্ষে সেদিন মেনে নেওয়া সম্ভব হয় নি...গতানুগতিকে অভ্যস্ত মন নতুনকে সহজভাবে গ্রহণ করতে চায় না। উচ্চশিক্ষিত মহলেও শান্তিনিকেতন সম্বন্ধে

²⁹ Amartya Sen, 15.

কৌতূহল যতখানি ছিল, আস্থা ততখানি ছিল না। শান্তিনিকেতন যদি আর-পাঁচটা প্রতিষ্ঠানের মতো হত তা হলে কোনোই চিন্তা ছিল না। কিন্তু একান্তভাবে নিজের মতো বলেই সহজে কারো মন পায়নি। লোকের মনে সংশয় থেকেই গিয়েছে। কোনো কোনো মহলে প্রচুর বিরূপ সমালোচনাও হয়েছে। রবীন্দ্রনাথ তাই নিয়ে মনে দুঃখ পেয়েছেন কিন্তু তাই বলে শান্তিনিকেতন তার স্বধর্ম ত্যাগ করে পরধর্ম গ্রহণ করুক অর্থাৎ দেশের দলে ভিড়ে যাক, এটি তিনি কখনো চান নি।³⁰

[... countrymen could not accept it easily at that time. The reason of this being that the Santiniketan school and the university later, in its practices and methods, was so very different from the schools, colleges and universities that we are habituated to see as educational institutions, it was not easy for many to accept the psyche that is habituated with the conventional cannot easily accept the new. Even among the intelligentsia there was not so much trust as there was curiosity about Santiniketan. Had Santiniketan been like the other institutions in vogue, there would have been no cause to worry. But since it was entirely individualistic, it could not easily win anybody's heart. Doubt kept lingering in people's minds. In some quarters, abundant criticism took place as well. Rabindranath felt hurt about that but he never wanted Santiniketan to abjure its own nature for the sake of others, that is, to step in line with the conventions.]

This account is highly revealing as it demonstrates the extent of animosity and lack of trust that Tagore's countrymen and intellectuals had towards his pioneering methods, which can now be deemed as postcolonial in character. Tagore was envisioning the ideal citizen for the future free India as well as a global character while devising his school and university. It was for the purpose of developing that ideal future citizen that Tagore was engaged in his experiments and his wholehearted efforts to provide his students with both diverse teachers and diverse syllabi. To him, education was man's lifelong endeavour and not some chapter that is finished by degrees and left behind, to carry on with the rest of one's life.

The most exemplary feature of Tagore's school was that it did not implement the conventional divide between the good boys and the bad boys or perhaps the binary of the front

³⁰ Heerendranath Dutta, *Santiniketaner Ek Jug* (Kolkata: Visva- Bharati, 1980), 6.

bencher/back bencher. Tagore accepted naughtiness, pranks and mischief as a natural part of childhood and thus welcomed them in his school, unlike other schools where the slightest deviation from the set standards of behaviour was likely to be punished. Tagore did not consider boyish pranks as culpable offences and used a loving hand to direct his pupils towards right action. In fact, the memorial accounts of both Heerendranath Dutta³¹ and Syed Mujtaba Ali³² testify that the Santiniketan school was regarded by the general populace as a reformatory of sorts where the incurably bad boys, who were unworthy of admission elsewhere, were relegated. Such an idea points both to the contemporary mind-set about child character as well as Tagore's firm refusal to be a part of that attitude and practice.

Reflecting on each aspect of the education process--the teacher, the curriculum, the student, the environment--Sunil Chandra Sarkar concludes that in Tagore's ideal education system,

The teacher should be an artist of life above everything else, the curriculum should wholly aim at providing opportunities for the expression of individual and community life, the student should do or learn nothing that does not directly contribute to his happiness and efficiency as a co-sharer in a joint life-enterprise. Naturally therefore, environment must receive much more importance than at present and schools and educational institutions become arenas of life and not merely certain types of activities.³³

The Teacher

One of the most vital parts of Tagore's educational enterprise was choosing the right kind of teacher—one who would be able to understand the core educational values of Tagore and would respect and inculcate them sympathetically among the students. In his essay "*Ashramer Rup o*

³¹ Ibid, 15.

³² Syed Mujtaba Ali, *Gurudeb o Santiniketan* (Kolkata: Mitra o Ghosh, 1981), 26.

³³ Sunil Chandra Sarkar, 100.

Bikash”, Tagore details the qualities that he deems to be absolutely necessary in a good teacher. He says,

তাঁরাই শিক্ষক হবার উপযুক্ত যাঁরা ধৈর্যবান, ছেলেদের প্রতি স্নেহ যাঁদের স্বাভাবিক। শিক্ষকদের নিজের চরিত্র সম্বন্ধে যথার্থ বিপদের কথা এই যে, যাদের সঙ্গে তাঁদের ব্যবহার, ক্ষমতায় তারা তাঁদের সমকক্ষ নয়। তাদের প্রতি সামান্য কারণে অসহিষ্ণু হওয়া এবং বিদ্রূপ করা অপমান করা শাস্তি দেওয়া অনায়াসেই সম্ভব। যাকে বিচার করা যায় তার যদি কোনো শক্তিই না থাকে তবে অবিচার করাই সহজ হয়ে ওঠে। ক্ষমতা ব্যবহার করবার স্বাভাবিক যোগ্যতা যাদের নেই অক্ষমের প্রতি অবিচার করতে কেবল যে তাদের বাঁধা থাকে না তা নয়, তাদের আনন্দ থাকে।³⁴

[Those who naturally have affection towards the boys are the ones to whom this patience is natural. The greatest danger about the teachers’ own character is that the ones with whom they deal are not their equal in power. It is easily possible to be intolerant of them for slight or imaginary reasons, to mock them, insult them or punish them. Like the ones whose job it is to chastise the weaker other and who are prone to commit wrong even when they are themselves not aware of it—this is no different. Those who have no real worthiness of exercising power, have not only no compunction in being unjust towards the powerless, but rather, take pleasure from it.]

Tagore in his essay “My School” clearly states what he considers as qualities absolutely undesirable in his ideal teacher and thus, by implication, the characteristics that he would value in one. I have discussed his own experience in school and critique of it in Chapter II.

Tagore wished to break this vicious cycle that produced students with undigested knowledge who went on to become schoolteachers, thereby creating more students like themselves.

Tagore wanted to create not only a new kind of student but also place before the world a new kind of teacher. The ideal he had in his mind was undoubtedly the figure of the Guru of ancient

³⁴ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14, 226.

India: someone to whom teaching was innate and who touched the souls of each of his students, someone to whom teaching was not just a livelihood but a calling. With such an ideal in mind, Tagore set out in search of teachers for his school—a search that led him to Jagadananda Roy, Bhupendranath Sanyal, Kshitimohan Sen, Bidhushekar Shastri, Nepalchandra Roy, Tejeschandra Sen, Sylvain Lévi and Igor Bogdanov. While he struggled to find adequate resources in order to materialize the vision he had, he spared no effort in ushering in the best of minds for the sake of his pupils. Tagore, much later in his life, spoke of his struggle to gather financial resources and the active hostility of his countrymen who wanted him to fail: “কী দুঃখের সে সব দিন গেছে যখন ছোটবৌর গহনা পর্যন্ত নিতে হয়েছে। চারিদিকে ঋণ বেড়ে চলেছে, ঘর থেকে খাইয়ে পরিয়ে ছেলে যোগাড় করেছি, কেউ ছেলে তো দেবেই না, গাড়ি ভাড়া ক’রে অন্যকে বারণ ক’রে আসবে”³⁵ [How sad were those days when I had to take even the jewellery of the Youngest Bride (his wife Mrinalini Devi, who was the youngest bride of the Tagore family). Debts were growing on all sides—I had collected students whom I housed and fed on my own expenses—nobody would send their own sons; rather, they would hire a car to visit others to discourage them as well.] This single-minded devotion to his educational enterprise meant that Tagore went to every possible length to appoint such people as teachers in his institution, in whom he saw the characteristics he was in search of. In his ideal teacher, Tagore sought the quality of “*jnān*” or the innate knowledge and wisdom that become a part of the individual and set his mind free to explore the infinite possibilities of the world unfettered by narrow prejudices.

When Tagore spoke of what attributes he felt were necessary for a good teacher, the possession of which gave him the confidence to proceed with his venture in spite of not having any prior experience in the field of education, he emphasized the need of profound sympathy for children and knowledge of their psychology.³⁶ Tagore’s quest was to establish the process of education as something organic and alive, thereby a part of life itself rather than a detached abstraction that the child mind would struggle to come to terms with. Moreover, he felt that a conducive atmosphere had to be created for the student to imbibe learning and it was the teacher’s responsibility to create that atmosphere where the student would derive joy from knowing new

³⁵ Maitreyee Devi, 63.

³⁶ *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3, 642.

things rather than trying to shoulder the burden of meaningless information that had no connection with their lived reality. Tagore's process of educating a student was akin to a journey undertaken by both the teacher and the student and one that gave joy to both of them.

In order to facilitate the symbiotic growth of the teacher and the student, Tagore emphasized the qualitative elevation of the faculty members of his school. He wanted to provide them with exposure to the wider world whereby they could broaden the range and scope of their vision. Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar write:

শিক্ষকেরা যাতে বৃহত্তর জগতের কর্মকান্ডের স্বাদ পেতে পারেন, তার জন্য রবীন্দ্রনাথ কলকাতা থেকে বিখ্যাত ইংরেজি পত্রিকা "দ্য স্ট্রান্ড", "হার্পারস ম্যাগাজিন", "চেম্বারস জার্নাল", "কন্টেম্পোরারি রিভিউ", "অ্যাটলান্টিক মাসুলি" ইত্যাদি নিয়মিতভাবে পুস্তকালয়ে আসার ব্যবস্থা করলেন। শুধু তাই নয়, শিক্ষকেরা যাতে সেগুলি পড়ে তার থেকে সারমর্মগুলি লিখে নেন ও পড়ানোয় ব্যবহার করেন তার জন্য শিক্ষকদের উদ্বুদ্ধ করতেন তিনি। ...থ্যাকার অ্যান্ড স্পিংক কোম্পানি নামে কলকাতার এক পুস্তক বিক্রেতা প্রতি সপ্তাহে একটি করে ইংরেজি বই পাঠাত।³⁷

[In order to facilitate the teachers in coming in contact with the workings of the wider world, Rabindranath arranged the regular delivery of the reputed English journals *The Strand*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Chamber's Journal*, *Contemporary Review*, *Atlantic Monthly* etc. from Kolkata to the library. Not only that, he encouraged teachers to read them and make notes of their relevant points and use them in their lessons. ... Thacker and Spink, a book-seller from Calcutta, used to send one English book per week.]

Tagore repeatedly criticized the teaching process that obsesses over data contained in a book and annotates those data with a plethora of disconnected information. He was firmly against the process of giving notes by the teacher to the student as a valid mode of education. His ire

³⁷ Swati Ghosh, Ashok Sarkar, *Kabir Pathshala: Pathabhavan o Shikshasatrer Itihash*, (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2015), 40.

against such practices is revealed in conversation with Maitreyee Devi about the process of true appreciation of poetry:

যত মাটি করে এই অধ্যাপকের দল, যারা কবিতার নোট লেখে আর ক্লাশে খুঁটিয়ে খুঁটিয়ে ব্যাখ্যা করে। কবি বলিয়াছেন...আহা কবি যা বলিয়াছেন তাতো কবিতাতেই আছে, আর যদি না বলিয়া থাকেন তবে সেটা জুড়ে দিয়ে লাভ কি? প্রত্যেকটি কথা তারা খুঁটিয়ে দেখে, কোনটি কেন বলিয়াছেন, তার গূঢ় তাৎপর্য কি, যে তাৎপর্য যে একমাত্র তাঁর ব্যাখ্যা ছাড়া আর কোনো রকমেই মনে আসত না, কি দরকার সে ব্যাখ্যা দিয়ে আমার? টীকা লেখবার কোনো দরকার হয় না।³⁸

[It is the group of professors who ruin everything. They write notes and analyse the nitty gritty in class. “The poet has said” ... ah, whatever the poet has said is already there in the poem and if he has not said it, what is to be gained from adding that on? They dissect every word—why he has said what, what is its hidden significance, the significance that would never have occurred to one’s mind without that professor’s explanation—what purpose would that explanation serve me? There is no need of annotations.]

While it is obvious that the above sentiment comes not only from a teacher but from one who is simultaneously poet and teacher, it also helps the reader in understanding the kind of teaching that Tagore does not approve of. Tagore wanted teachers to orient themselves in such a way so that they can encourage the questioning spirit in their students and invoke their desire for knowledge. He was against the practice of one-sided lectures, mechanically delivered, that did not involve students in the lesson. Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar observe: “তিনি মনে করতেন, শিক্ষক নিজে তাঁর প্রয়োজনমতো পাঠ্যবই রচনা করবেন, ক্লাসে এক তরফা পড়ানোর বদলে আলোচনায় বেশি জোর দেবেন, ছেলেদের মনে অনুসন্ধিৎসা জাগিয়ে তোলার চেষ্টা করবেন; শিক্ষার একটি মূল উদ্দেশ্য যে ছাত্র-ছাত্রীদের মনকে অনুসন্ধানী করে তোলা, এটা কবি মনে-প্রাণে বিশ্বাস করতেন।”³⁹ [In his (Tagore’s) opinion, the teacher could compose textbooks according to his requirement, rather than one-sided lectures he should concentrate more on class discussions, he should try to invoke the questioning

³⁸ Maitreyee Devi, 108-109.

³⁹ Ibid, 41.

spirit of the students; the poet earnestly believed that one of the principal aims of education is to evoke curiosity in the minds of students.]

When Tagore opened his school in 1902, the Principal was Brahmabandhav Upadhyay and aiding him in running the school was Reba Chand. But both Chand and Brahmabandhav had very rigid notions about discipline and running of the school that Tagore did not find conducive to creation of the atmosphere he had in mind for his school. Seven months later, the responsibility of the Headmaster was bestowed upon the newly appointed teacher Monoranjan Banerjee. The other faculty members were: Jagadananda Roy taught Mathematics and Science, Subodhchandra Majumdar History and English, Narendranath Bhattacharya taught Bengali, and Haricharan Bandopadhaya taught Sanskrit. Monoranjan Banerjee was a teacher of English as well. Tagore himself took classes of English and Bengali even though he often had to be away from Santiniketan to discharge his other varied responsibilities. This list underwent a multitude of changes with new appointments growing with the passage of time. The charge of the school also changed hands from one Headmaster to another. More subjects were added as well. In time, more and more teachers joined the school of whom some came from outside India as Tagore wanted his institution to learn from the greatest minds.

The Curriculum

As one attempts an analysis of Tagore's philosophy of education, it is important to define what constituted education for him. He has explained it himself in numerous essays, some of which have been translated as part of this thesis. Sunil Chandra Sarkar gives a succinct summary of Tagore's concept of education in the following lines:

Education, according to Tagore, is the all-round development of the individual in harmony with the Universal, the Supreme Person who has in himself the various levels or planes of consciousness and experience corresponding to man's physical self, life, mind and soul. The Universal Man holds within himself all that Man has been, is and will be in future. He is not absolute in the sense of being the last unalterable consummation, the immutably Perfect. He is perfect because he unifies in one grand harmony the endless variations of individual attitudes, fractional

experiences, relative truths. But he himself is a dynamic power, a universal soul, mind, life and self creating out of itself an endless series of evolving phenomena.⁴⁰

This profound attitude guided the everyday practices at Brahmacharyashram as the institution firmly refused to orient its teaching around the objective of gearing its pupils to pass examinations and acquire degrees. It is also the reason why at certain critical junctures, during the early days of the school, Tagore stated his unwillingness to admit older pupils who would naturally wish to prepare themselves for examinations such as the Matriculation. He preferred to welcome younger boys who, being at the most formative stage of their lives, would be best suited to imbibe and cultivate Tagore's philosophy of a holistic education. A letter written by Tagore to Manoranjan Bandopadhyaya dated 20 October 1904 attests to this: "... ছুটির পর হইতে বোলপুর বিদ্যালয়ের আমূল পরিবর্তন করা যাইতেছে। বড় ছেলেদের একেবারে বিদায় করা গেল। ... কেবল মাত্র কুড়িটি অল্প বয়সের ছাত্র স্কুলে রাখিব তাহার অধিক আর লইব না – এন্ট্রেন্স পরীক্ষার দিকে না তাকাইয়া রীতিমত শিক্ষা দিবার চেষ্টা করা যাইবে।"⁴¹ [...there would be a complete change in the working of the Bolpur school after the vacation. The older students have been bidden farewell to entirely. ... Only twenty students, young in age, would be admitted to the school and no more than that--an attempt would be made to properly educate them without the consideration of Entrance examinations]. Tagore's contempt for the exam-centric approach is perfectly explicit in this section.

Another significant aspect of Tagore's educational policy was the simultaneous involvement of body and mind in the process of learning. Tagore was of the opinion that the complete process of human thinking and expression involves the dual action of mind and body. The movement of the body aids the mind in the process of thinking. He illustrated this idea in an interview with Elmhirst where he states:

It is a function of the body, not merely to carry out vital actions so that we may live and move, but so that we may express, and not with the face alone, but with the legs, the arms and the hands. All our limbs have their own power to express. This truth came to me one day in London. One of your people, a great thinker, asked me to lunch with him. I won't give you his name, but there he was, another philosopher,

⁴⁰ Sunil Chandra Sarkar, 24.

⁴¹ Tagore, *Chithipatre Bidyalay-Prasanga*, 40.

sitting opposite me. Suddenly, he left his chair and began to walk up and down. As soon as his thoughts had started circulating in his mind, he felt he needed the accompaniment of a circulation of movement, a co-ordination of his body. This was because his mind felt a vital connection with his body, and his body with the spontaneous and natural movement of his mind. The act of leaving his chair and of walking up and down expressed the demand of his body for free play for his thoughts.⁴²

This combined action of mind and body gets crippled when a child enters the regulated domain of school education where he is trained to think sitting still, thereby stifling one half of the thinking process. The non-involvement of his body in his comprehension, conceptualization and expression is something that was drilled into the student by the rigour of the school education system. Tagore admits that there are indeed certain thought processes that require the thinker to sit still, but he also insists that an expression through the medium of words must involve the body as well as the mind. He states:

When we try to express ourselves merely in words, we feel incomplete, and for the fullest expression there should certainly be arm and leg movement as well. The poet, or the musician, gesticulates as he works. He must move his arms, his hands, and wrinkle his face. Why, then, doesn't he start up from his chair and dance his ideas out in the sunshine? Because he's been to school. It is at school that he has learnt the habit of stifling so thoroughly the natural companionship of body with mind.⁴³

It was Tagore's aim to allow the natural flow of the human thought process to function through the spontaneous interplay of mind and body in his pupils at Santiniketan. He wanted their learning process to strengthen both their bodies and minds and he was well aware that it would not be possible merely by allowing the students to have some free time to frolic and play. Thus he incorporated the movement of the human body in conjunction with the working of the mind in the

⁴² Rabindranath Tagore, "The Art of Movement in Education", in L. K. Elmhirst, *Rabindranath Tagore: Pioneer in Education* (London: Murray, 1961), 102.

⁴³ Ibid.

classes that he taught in his school. Ananda Lal, through his reference to another section of this conversation, has emphasized on the inherent ability within a child's body for natural movement and how this natural ability, if nurtured properly, can bloom into superior performance.⁴⁴ This ability for natural movement, inextricably linked to performance, can be brought out through the highly effective medium of theatre. Tagore further explains:

The best actors will always be those who have been trained to use the whole body as a tool for the expression of thought, of emotion or of sentiment. Words, to convey the full perfection of their message, must be accompanied by the appropriate bodily movement. If our schools were to run on the right lines, boys and girls would never lose their natural gifts of bodily expression, making use for that purpose of all their limbs.

Unfortunately, today, in civilized communities, expression through movement is repressed and is no longer looked upon as quite proper...

I advise you to make the practice of drama and of the histrionic arts compulsory for all children.⁴⁵

A description of how he facilitated this is furnished in Chapter V. O'Connell terms this mode of education as "Kinesthetic Education".⁴⁶ Theatre served as a pivotal mode of education in the novel curriculum of Tagore's school. The early years of Brahmacharyashram witnessed productions of Tagore's plays with all-male cast or largely male suited to the demographic of the students admitted to the school. Ananda Lal has provided a detailed account of how Tagore's plays included male and female characters in keeping with the ratio of the male and female students admitted to his school from the early years of Santiniketan to the later years when, with the birth of Visva-Bharati, the number of female students outstripped that of the male. Lal's account, spanning across years from 1908, when *Shadotshab* and *Mukut* were produced, to 1933, when *Chandalika* was staged, provides a clear understanding of how Tagore choice to include male or female characters

⁴⁴ Ananda Lal, *Three Plays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 35.

⁴⁵ Elmhirst, 105-6.

⁴⁶ Kathleen M. O'Connell, 215.

in his plays were largely determined by the demographic of his students thereby highlighting the indispensability of theatre within the curriculum of Tagore's school. In the words of Lal:

From the technical standpoint the beginnings of theatre in Santiniketan were quite rudimentary. Rathindranath tells us that the stage began as a 'ramshackle shed behind the Library, used as the dining hall', where only 'a few rickety bedsteads' sufficed to create the necessary platform.⁴⁷ Soon, however, a spacious hall in a newly constructed dormitory became the site of performances...⁴⁸

These productions that went on to create the Santiniketan style of acting and won almost unanimous critical acclaim from contemporary audience, were integral part of the education process of *Brahmacharyashram*. William Pearson, in his record of the early years of Tagore's school, elaborates how theatre was cohesively integrated in the process of the school's instruction:

At the end of each term arrangements are made for staging one of the poet's plays. The teachers and boys take the different parts... The poet coaches the actors himself, first reading the play aloud, and then reading it over with those who are to take part. During the days when the play I being rehearsed there are not many classes held, for the boys of the whole school are always present at the rehearsals...⁴⁹

It is significant that no or very few classes were held during the rehearsals and the entire student body, irrespective of whether they were participating in the production or not, were present at the rehearsals. This proves the importance of theatre in the curriculum of the school so much so that the rehearsals were classes in themselves – where even the onlooking student learnt lessons that could not be delivered in the conventional classroom.

The three pillars of Tagore's education policy were, in the opinion of Anathnath Basu as expressed in his essay "Tagore's Educational Philosophy in relation to Basic Education", freedom, creative self-expression and active communion with nature and man.⁵⁰ In order to fulfil all three

⁴⁷ Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1958), 99.

⁴⁸ Lal, 30-31.

⁴⁹ W.W. Pearson, *Shantiniketan: The Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 61-62.

⁵⁰ Anathnath Basu, "Tagore's Educational Philosophy in relation to Basic Education", in *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly: Education* Number Vol. XII, 48.

of these, Tagore needed to devise a new syllabus for his students. That Tagore was intimately aware of the syllabi being taught in various schools of his time is testified by his essay “*Chhatrabrittir Pathyapustak*” where he categorizes the subjects alongside their pertinent books as were being taught in the different classes under the colonial system. Tagore sought to differ from this and create a system where the student would actually learn and comprehend. He aimed at making the education process a joyful experience for his pupils. He hoped that their learning would be informed with the joy of discovery that would prevent them from approaching their lessons as a dreary and miserable task. Amlan Dutta, in his analysis of Tagore’s philosophy of education, states:

শিশুর খুশীর মধ্যে কিন্তু একটা অকারণ আনন্দ আছে। অকারণে পুলকিত হয়ে ওঠে শিশু, অকারণে নাচতে থাকে। এটা একটা মূল কথা। এই বিশ্ব সম্বন্ধে, প্রকৃতি সম্বন্ধে, মানুষের একটা অকারণ আনন্দবোধ আছে। ...

সাংসারিক অর্থে যাকে বিজ্ঞ ও বিচক্ষণ বলে, আমরা যখন ক্রমে তাই হয়ে উঠি, তখন এই অকারণ আনন্দটাকে পাগলামি মনে করি। আমরা কতগুলো কাজের কথা শুধু যে শিখি তাই নয়, সেটাকেই যেন একমাত্র শিক্ষণীয় মনে করি। ... রবীন্দ্রনাথ শিশুর শিক্ষার বিষয়ে কাজের কথাটা বাদ দিতে চেয়েছিলেন তা নয়। কিন্তু ঐ অকাজের কথাটাকে তিনি গুরুত্ব দিয়েছিলেন। রবীন্দ্রনাথের শিক্ষাদর্শের এটা একটা প্রধান কথা – একটা মৌল দার্শনিক ভিত্তি বলা যেতে পারে।⁵¹

[Inherent in the pleasure of a child is a sense of joy that is beyond reason. The child overflows with joy for no reason, for no reason they start dancing. This is fundamental. There is a sense of joy that man has about the universe, about nature that is beyond reason. ...

That which is regarded as knowledgeable and wise in the worldly sense, as we slowly acquire that, we regard this joy beyond reason to be madness. Not only do we learn some matters that serve practical purposes, we treat them as the only things worth learning. ... It is not that Tagore wanted to take away practical knowledge from his way of educating children. But he emphasized the purposeless

⁵¹ Amlan Dutta, *Prabandha Sangraha* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1990), 68.

joy of learning. It is one of the most important principles of Rabindranath's philosophy of education--it can be termed a fundamental basis of his philosophy.]

When Tagore embarked upon this journey, he found frequently that there were no adequate textbooks that would serve the purpose of educating his pupils in the way he wanted. As a result, he took it upon himself to compose a number of textbooks and urged other teachers to write books from which their students would benefit. Many obliged. Haricharan Bandopadhaya wrote *Sanskrit Prabesh* in four volumes to fill the need of an adequate Sanskrit textbook. As for the much-dreaded subject English, Tagore tried to make the task of learning the foreign language more pleasant by introducing children's stories such as *Tom Thumb*, *Cinderella* and *Jack the Giant Killer* in the syllabus.

In addition to these conventional subjects, Tagore introduced subjects such as Carpentry, Dance, Music, Fine Arts, all of which provided scope for the aspect of creative self-expression that Tagore felt was so very essential for the true development of a child. He tried to stir the interest of students in literature through the medium of theatre and listening to music rather than focusing solely upon grammar lessons and classroom teaching. One can easily argue that Tagore was developing what is at present regarded as an interactive teaching-learning process that engages the student actively and does not relegate him to the role of a passive listener to classroom lectures. Alongside these, literary meets of the students were arranged at regular intervals where they were encouraged to read out their own writings and discuss those among themselves. All of these were geared towards the development of the individual personalities of the students rather than molding them in a set pattern as was the practice of the colonial school-system. Tagore also introduced subjects such as book-binding—which the present-day education system would certainly regard as vocational training.

Even in the learning of a conventional subject like Science, Tagore preferred to take a practical approach rather than depending upon book-based learning. The documentation of Elmhirst and Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay quoted earlier in this chapter provide a clear idea of how the classes in Geography, Chemistry, Nature-study were conducted in a manner that brought the students into regular and direct contact with nature. Tagore furnished his school with a laboratory where the necessary apparatus was gifted by the Maharaja of Tripura. The students also had access to a proper telescope through which they could observe astronomical movements. Even

then Tagore constantly regretted having not been able to provide the necessary infrastructure for a proper scientific education owing to the immense expenditure it would involve that was beyond his means. He struggled life-long to make ends meet in his educational institution. Prabhat Kumar's writing provides testimony to how far the teachers at the school exerted themselves to provide the requisite instrument support for the adequate scientific learning of their students. He writes: “বারিমাপন যন্ত্র বা রেনগেজ কলিকাতায় লরেন্স মেয়োর দোকানে লিখিয়া পাই নাই – তাহারা বোম্বাই হইতে আনাইয়া দেয়। দেহরাদুনে মেটিরিওলজিক্যাল বা আবহতত্ত্ব বিভাগকে আমি পত্র দিই; তাহারা কীভাবে তাপাদির মাপন করিতে হয় সে সম্বন্ধে পুস্তিকা ও একখানি পুস্তক পড়িবার জন্য পাঠাইয়া দেয়।”⁵² [could not procure a rain gauge by writing to the shop Lawrence & Mayo in Calcutta – they arranged to have it supplied from Bombay. I had written to the Meteorological Department at Dehradun; they sent over a pamphlet and a book on how to measure temperature.]

The Environment

Above everything else, Tagore strived to provide his students with the sense of a community life where students and teachers belonged to one community and shared their joys and sorrows as one, thereby facilitating the sense of mutual sympathy that led to each respecting the other. In creating this sense of community, Tagore was also trying to awaken in the minds of his pupils a sense of responsibility towards society so that they could learn to contribute towards the well-being of society as well. They were encouraged to interact with the local villages and they took up the responsibility of opening a night school and teaching there in order to serve the local village community. Thus, Tagore's was an attempt to bring the student, irrespective of the social class he was born in, closer to the common people of India and, in the process, to get to know their own country intimately. This sense of service and duty was an integral part of the ashram life. Even though Tagore had students from well-to-do backgrounds as well as otherwise, the school was firm in its denial of material luxuries to all its students, who lived a very simple life that could even be regarded as rigour at times. They had to take care of their individual needs as there were no workers

⁵² Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Santiniketan-Visvabharati*, 90.

or servants to tend to them. A detailed account of the daily life at the ashram school is provided in Chapter V.

Finally, Tagore believed in the role that Nature plays in educating the human mind. Thus, his school was a place where the students came into unfettered and intimate contact with boundless Nature as they witnessed its varied hues in their open-air classes and became attuned with the moods of Nature without being instructed in any specific way. The spiritual value of this unhindered communion, Tagore felt, would facilitate the spiritual development of the students' individual personalities. O'Connell opines that Tagore's personal experience of having been tutored by his father in close proximity to Nature, when his father took him for a trip to the Himalayas, had a formative influence on him and contributed to the immense value he attributed to the role that Nature should play in education. She describes the close involvement of the students with Nature in the following lines:

Rabindranath felt a curriculum should revolve organically around nature, and classes were held in open air under the trees providing for an unstructured appreciation of the plant and animal kingdom, and seasonal changes. The children did not sit on chairs, but rather on handwoven mats beneath trees which they were allowed to climb and run around between classes.⁵³

Thus the lesson that Tagore was trying to impart was, in his own words, all about "how to live a complete life" which to him was "the purpose of education".⁵⁴ Amiya Chakravarty has analysed the character of Tagorean education against the backdrop of a country starved of the life-giving water from the fountainhead of knowledge:

Education has its roots in the desire to know and feel the wonder of existence, it is bound up with the vital urge to reciprocate experiences and to explore the marvel of belonging together to a world which carries the wealth of the past and moves towards creative fulfilment. Any system of education which ignores these basic facts and merely develops proficiency militates against the poetry of life itself; the products of such education can never take a whole view of life, nor function in a

⁵³ Kathleen M. O'Connell, 202.

⁵⁴ *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3, 644.

word where smooth mechanical adjustments are available. Hence the spectacle of expensively educated misfits who have never been trained in any real school of life and who carry their burden of information without being able to link their knowledge with the subtle realities of social existence. Rabindranath Tagore who was a great intellectual and a poet of life knew this, and his answer to the insistent demand for true education was the creation of the small but active unit, the centre of Santiniketan, which has now gained world-wide recognition....⁵⁵

The Student and Female Education

Tagore's school was one of the rare places in contemporaneous India where the system of coeducation was practiced and female students were just as welcome as male students. Admittedly, this opportunity for the female student was not present at the inception of the Brahmacharyashram in 1902. In fact, the very idea of the *brahmachari* is a predominantly male one even though in ancient India there were instances of female *brahmacharis* or *brahmacharinis*. But when Tagore started his school, he did not open the doors to female students because the education of girls was still very much a contentious issue at that time. However, Tagore had the desire to include girls in his educational mission. In accordance with this wish, Kshitimohan Sen entrusted the responsibility of educating his sister-in-law Hemlata Sen and two daughters of Prasannakumar Sen, Hiron and Indu, upon Tagore. To their number, another three were added in 1909, only one of whose names has been recorded: Labanyalekha. The school opened its doors to girls in 1909 with these six students and it is worth noting that the classes for male and female students were held together, effectively making it a coeducational practice.

Further on, Tagore faced a number of hindrances in maintaining the school for girls and it was witness to various ups and downs regarding the inclusion of female students. But the major focus in this section is upon what Tagore considered as the necessary and right education for women. In this regard, I attempt a close reading of Tagore's essay "*Stri Shiksha*" and, through that, interpret and analyse Tagore's ideas about female education. The essay opens with references to

⁵⁵ Amiya Chakravarty, Preface to Bhupendranath Sarkar, *Tagore, the Educator* (Calcutta: Academic Publishers, 1974), p 10-11.

the objections to female education that were prevalent in Tagore's times. Without dwelling on those oft-repeated objections, it is necessary to problematize instead what, in Tagore's opinion, should consist of female education. Tagore accepts that men and women have an equal right to gain knowledge of all that is worthy of knowing in the world. However, the problem arises when Tagore states that men and women are created to be different and that difference cannot be ironed flat by providing the two sexes with the same education. He clearly states that if there be no difference in the way men and women are educated, then that would amount to a refusal to abide by Nature's law: "কিন্তু তাই বলিয়া শিক্ষাপ্রণালীতে মেয়ে পুরুষে কোথাও কোনো ভেদ থাকবে না, এ কথা বলিলে বিধাতাকে অমান্য করা হয়।"⁵⁶ [But it would be disregarding God if we do not keep any distinction in the modes of educating men and women.] This sentence reeks ominously of gender stereotyping as Tagore opines that men constitute one type while women another type in Nature. Tagore proceeds to divide knowledge into two categories—pure knowledge and behavioural or application-oriented knowledge. He accepts that in the field of pure knowledge the male and female students can stand as one but he raises an objection to the same holding true in the field of behavioural knowledge.

Tagore refuses to accept that men and women can have the same field of operation in life. In woman's desire to get the same education as man, he sees her denial of the fundamental truth that women are created to be physically and psychologically different from men. This is deeply problematic, as Tagore wandered into the dangerous territory of gender roles and social conditioning. He says,

মেয়েদের শরীরের এবং মনের প্রকৃতি পুরুষের হইতে স্বতন্ত্র বলিয়াই তাহাদের ব্যবহারের ক্ষেত্র স্বভাবতই স্বতন্ত্র হইয়াছে। আজকাল বিদ্রোহের ঝাঁকে এক দল মেয়ে এই গোড়াকার কথাটাকেই অস্বীকার করিতেছেন। তাঁরা বলেন, মেয়েদের ব্যবহারের ক্ষেত্র পুরুষের সঙ্গে একেবারে সমান।⁵⁷

[The nature of women's body and mind is different from that of men and that is why their behavioural sphere is separate from that of men. But at present, under the

⁵⁶ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 16, 286.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 286-287.

fiery influence of rebellion, a group of women are disavowing this basic fact. They say that the behavioural sphere of women is completely the same as that of men.]

Here Tagore is trying to define the basis of men's and women's behavioural existence as impossibly different, as if it would be ludicrous to imagine the fields of their operation ever being same. He goes to the extent of invalidating the claims of equality made by women by saying that those claims arise simply from the passion of rebelling against society. He denies those claims from having any truth or substance to them. In other words, Tagore, in this essay, does nothing other than standing behind the gender stereotyping that had been propagated by patriarchal society through the ages.

In his following argument, Tagore cleverly manipulates his statements so that it can be proved that women's claims of having been compelled to comply to the wishes of patriarchy are false; rather, women out of their own free will complied to the wishes of patriarchy because if that be not so then women are naturally servile. Tagore tries to establish his argument by saying that only the naturally servile would submit to such a fate and anyone who is not naturally servile would rather die and not tolerate such treatment. Thus, it is made evident to the reader that women have either willingly complied to the lot meted out to them by patriarchy or they are naturally servile as they have not died protesting.

Such an argument is very difficult to swallow in a society of equals because it conveniently shifts the onus of patriarchal repression on the shoulders of women by implying that they themselves are the cause of what their lot has become. The essay goes on to essentialize women by stating that it is natural for women to love and be wives and mothers. This essentialization is done to prove the fact that women's compliance arises from her natural inclination towards being a wife and mother, thereby cancelling out the possibility of servility: “আসল কথা এই, স্ত্রী হওয়া, মা হওয়া, মেয়েদের স্বভাব; দাসী হওয়া নয়।”⁵⁸ [The truth is that it is female nature to be a mother and to be a wife—not to be a slave.] It thoroughly negates the possibility that some woman might not feel comfortable in these gender roles made compulsory for her by society. She might have no wish to be a loving wife or mother at all. Tagore states that society judges women in accordance with what he terms as the Law of Love, which turns all women naturally into loving wives and mothers. The

⁵⁸ Ibid, 286.

unfairness of such a parameter does not strike any chord with Tagore. According to him, the stated compliance can be shameful only when there is no love but only duty. But the question arises as to why one half of society would need to comply with the ways of the other half rather than there being a mutual compliance. What is further problematic is that Tagore deems that the sphere of women's operation, that is, the domestic life of being a wife and mother, is a place which has been naturally chosen by women rather than it having been prescribed by patriarchal society as the limited space allotted to woman for her existence. Such a statement nullifies the whole system of patriarchal power structure where women are denied agency and sufficient power to choose their own field of action. The divide between *বারমহল* (the outer or public section of the house) and *অন্দরমহল* (the inner quarters where women were confined in accordance with societal norms) is thus simplistically explained away by Tagore as the consequence of a natural choice made by women. The history of the denial of women's desires, the erasure of her identity and selfhood that occurred as a result of this segregation of her sphere of action, is invalidated by the argument forwarded by Tagore: "...সমাজে মেয়েরা যে ব্যবহারের ক্ষেত্রটি অধিকার করিয়াছে সেখানে স্বভাববশতই তারা আপনিই আসিয়া পৌঁছিয়াছে, বাহিরের কোনো অত্যাচার তাহাদিগকে বাধ্য করে নাই।"⁵⁹ [...cannot dismiss the fact that the behavioural space that women have occupied is somewhere they themselves have naturally reached and they have not been compelled by any external force.]

The purpose of writing this is not to prove Tagore as a person with narrow patriarchal mindset by dint of which he aimed to suppress women. Such a description of Tagore would be invalidated by the countless representations of female figures that we find in his literary oeuvre where he depicts their struggle to find their own identity and live life on their own terms. "*Strir Patra*" ("The Wife's Letter"), *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*), *Jogajog* (*Relationships*), *Chitrangada*, *Rakta-karabi*, *Tapati*, "*Aparichita*" ("The Unknown Woman") and "*Sabala*" ("The Powerful Woman") are only a few of the numerous writings where he speaks about the significance of female agency and the desperate struggle that women are mired in owing to being the powerless half in the patriarchal power system. Such a depiction of women in his short stories, novels, plays and poems only serves as a major contradiction when pitted against the thoughts expressed by Tagore in the essay under discussion. Perhaps this contradiction is symptomatic of the

⁵⁹ Ibid, 288.

contradiction that was a part of Tagore's own psyche, which was unable to truly view the sexes as equal in spite of the respect and understanding shown towards women both in his literary oeuvre and his actions in real life.

Here it is also worthy of mention that in all his essays dealing with the topic of education, even after 1909 when girls entered the school, Tagore constantly refers to students as “ছেলেরা” or “boys”. We are thus left with the question as to whether the student was necessarily a male figure for Tagore or if the choice of word is regulated by linguistic norm where childhood, irrespective of it belonging to a boy or a girl, is denoted by the term “ছেলেবেলা”, literally “boyhood”. This question has repeatedly served as an issue of disquiet for the present translator, as choosing to take the term “ছেলেরা” as a generic term denoting childhood irrespective of gender would be robbing the issue of the problem of gender politics that certainly informs linguistic choices consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, I have used the term “boys” in translation in order to retain the problematic aspect that these essays present the reader with as far as gender is concerned.

Now, to return to the way Tagore's school operated in reality, we find that it was a space where male and female students did have the equal opportunity to enjoy the three pillars of Tagore's educational philosophy as stated earlier: freedom, creative self-expression and education through active communion with man and Nature. The female section of the school had to be closed down due to operational difficulties for a period of two years. When it was reopened, Tagore had a batch of fresh female students who were mostly daughters and sisters of the teachers of the school. To name a few: Maya, the daughter of Haricharan Bandopadhaya; Usha, the sister of Sudhakanta Raychoudhuri; Ranu, the daughter of Phanibhushan Adhikari; Manju and Jaya, daughters of Surendranath Tagore; Amita Sen, the daughter of Kshitimohan Sen (two more daughters and a niece of Kshitimohan Sen joined as well). Tagore himself taught their Bengali and English classes, accounts of which have reached readers through the writings of many students of that period. Those memorial accounts would be discussed in detail in Chapter V. The classes were held in the coeducational manner where boys and girls had access to the same teaching.

That Tagore was no conservative upholder of patriarchal norms is testified by the fact that he wished his female students to take part in the performing arts; he actively encouraged and involved them in music, theatre and dance (albeit later, from the 1920s) which were huge social taboos, completely unacceptable to society at large. So even in educating his female students,

Tagore was certainly breaking social barriers and braving immense criticism in the process. The behavioural education that Tagore referred to in his essay was imparted through classes in cooking and needlework, the details of which will be furnished in my last chapter.

Tagore, very significantly, encouraged his female students to engage in serious academic research as well, which reveals the healthy respect that he had for the academic capacity of the female brain. One can take the instance of his student Rama whom he encouraged to engage in research about women's position in Bengali literature of the pre-Bankimchandra period:

রমা শান্তিনিকেতনে আমার একক্লাস (sic) নীচের ছাত্রী ছিল, বাংলা ছিল তার বিশেষ পাঠ্য। তারা কজনে মিলে রবীন্দ্রনাথের কাছে গিয়ে হাজির হতেই তিনি তাদের পাঠ্য সম্বন্ধে খুঁটিয়ে নানা প্রশ্ন করলেন এবং বললেন, “কলেজের পাঠ্য বই- এর গণ্ডীর মধ্যে থাকলে শিক্ষা সম্পূর্ণ হয় না। মৌলিক কিছু করতে হবে।” রমাকে বললেন, “তুই বঙ্কিম- যুগের সাহিত্যে নারীর স্থান বিষয়ে গবেষণা কর।”⁶⁰

[Rama, a female student, was my junior by one year at Santiniketan. Her special paper was Bengali. When a few of them went before Rabindranath, he at once asked them various probing questions about their studies and said, “Education cannot be complete if one remains limited within the boundaries of the college texts. It is necessary to do something original.” To Rama he said, “You should take up research on the topic of women's position in the literature of the pre- Bankim period.”]

Thus, even though Tagore's essay on female education can be criticized severely for its insistence upon traditional gender roles, in real life, Tagore provided constant encouragement and support to his female students in their academic pursuits and had faith in their artistic and academic abilities as demonstrated by the incidents mentioned above. Tagore was indeed a pioneer in the methods he applied in educating female students. He went against every convention of his time by not only starting coeducational classes but also actively involving girls in the performing arts and

⁶⁰ Amita Sen, *Santiniketane Ashramkanya* (Kolkata: Tagore Research Institute, 2002), 39.

bringing them on stage to perform live in front of public audiences in Kolkata—something that was unthinkable for the Bengali *bhadralok* society as far as women were concerned.

CHAPTER IV

REFLECTION OF TAGORE'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY IN HIS FICTION, POETRY AND DRAMA

The ideas about education that Tagore elaborated upon in his essays, and brought into application in his running of the Santiniketan school, made their presence very prominently felt in his fiction, poetry and drama as well. The plays, in fact, are of particular significance as Tagore often used them not only as a medium of his own artistic expression but also, through their performances involving the pupils, a medium for teaching his students. Tagore writes, "They (the students) knew when I was employed in writing some drama and they took an intense interest as it went on and developed, and in the process of their rehearsal they got through a great deal more reading of literature than they could through grammar and class-teaching."¹

In numerous non-fictional writings, Tagore has referred to his ideal of the Vedic education system that had formed the principal motivating factor behind the conceptualization and formation of the Brahmavidyalaya. However, the exact image of the Vedic ashram that Tagore had in his mind is not frequently found in his creative writing. It is in the poem *Biday Abhishap* (1893) or *The Curse at Farewell* that the reader is made familiar with the image of the ashram and *tapovan* that served as inspiration to Tagore. The poem is based on the mythical tale of Kacha (Kach) and Devayani (Debjani) where Kach, son of Brihaspati, arrives at the ashram of Guru Sukracharya with the aim of being accepted as his student. After spending hundreds of years learning from Sukracharya at his ashram, Kach completes his education and seeks to take his leave from Debjani, the daughter of Sukracharya, who has fallen in love with him. The love story of Kach and Debjani has no significance to our context of Tagore's educational philosophy, but as the two converse, they repeatedly refer to their surroundings – the trees, the river, the cow they rear at the ashram – and it is made evident that these are animate characters and not simply parts of a setting. The atmosphere of the ashram is revealed through Kach bidding adieu to every "body" of the ashram, human or non-human:

¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Sisir Kumar Das, vol. 3 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), 642-643.

কচ। ওগো বনস্পতি,
 আশ্রিতজনের বন্ধু, করি নমস্কার।
 কত পান্থ বসিবেক ছায়ায় তোমার,
 কত ছাত্র কত দিন আমার মতন
 প্রচ্ছন্ন প্রচ্ছায়তলে নীরব নির্জন
 তৃণাসনে, পতঙ্গের মৃদুগুঞ্জস্বরে,
 করিবেক অধ্যয়ন—প্রাতঃস্নান-পরে
 ঋষিবালকেরা আসি সজল বঙ্কল
 শুকাবে তোমার শাখে—রাখালের দল
 মধ্যাহ্নে করিবে খেলা— ওগো, তারি মাঝে
 এ পুরানো বন্ধু যেন স্মরণে বিরাজে।

দেবযানী। মনে রেখো আমাদের হোমধেনুটিরে; ...

কচ। সুধা হতে সুধাময়
 দুগ্ধ তার— দেখে তারে পাপক্ষয় হয়,
 মাতরূপা, শান্তিস্বরূপিণী, শুভ্রকান্তি,
 পয়স্বিনী। ...

দেবযানী। আর মনে রেখো আমাদের কলস্বনা
 স্রোতস্বিনী বেণুমতী।

কচ। তারে ভুলিব না।
 বেণুমতী, কত কুসুমিত কুঞ্জ দিয়ে
 মধুকণ্ঠে আনন্দিত কলগান নিয়ে
 আসিছে শুশ্রূষা বহি গ্রাম্যবধূসম
 সদা ক্ষিপ্রগতি, প্রবাসসঙ্গিনী মম
 নিত্যশুভব্রতা।²

[KACH: O Forest-King, to you

² Rabindranath Tagore, *Sanchayita* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1969), 204-205.

I humbly bow, to you the friend of those
 That seek your shelter. Where you interpose
 A cover, travellers, till the fierce noon pass,
 Shall rest; students (how oft!), couched on your grass,
 Like me, amid your lonely shadows great,
 Lulled by the insect-hum, shall meditate.
 The rishis' sons, after their morning dip,
 Shall hang to dry their dress of bark adrip Upon your branches; herd-boys in deep
 noon

Shall play beneath your boughs. Oh, grant this boon!

With these remember your old comrade, me!

DEBJANI: Recall our sacrificial cow, for she
 Gave you to drink her milk, like nectar; now

Do not through pride neglect this holy cow.

KACH: Nectar from nectar was her milk! Her sight

Destroyed all sin—peaceful, most snowy-white,

Milk-charged, a mother-form! ...

DEBJANI: And Benumati too, our singing river,

Remember.

KACH: How shall I forget her ever?

Through many a flowery copse, with joyous, sweet,

Low-murmured tune, speeding on rapid feet,

As though a woman of the village, thou

Hast carried service, on thy holy vow

Ever intent, O thou my exile's dear

Companion, Benumati!³]

This section from the poem is significant to the understanding of Tagore's educational model as it gives the reader an insight into how Tagore envisioned the Vedic ashram and its surrounding *tapovan*. At the expense of diverting from the central theme of this chapter, it is worth mentioning that this farewell that Kach bids to the *tapovan* is reminiscent of Kalidasa's Shakuntala bidding an emotional adieu to the *tapovan* she was reared in, before she departs for her husband's palace at Hastinapur. Tagore virtually revered Kalidasa. He even wrote an introductory essay to the English stage version of *Abhijāna Sakuntalam* prepared by Kedar Nath Dasgupta and published by Macmillan in 1920. Sanskrit pandits, too, regard this valedictory scene as the finest not only in Kalidasa's play but also in all of classical literature. It can be suggested that Tagore was significantly influenced by Kalidasa's imaginative reconstruction of a Vedic *tapovan*, which informed not only Tagore's poetic output but also made its presence felt in how he envisioned the

³ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Curse at Farewell*, trans. Edward Thompson (London: George G. Harrap, 1924), 24-28. Although not entirely satisfactory, this is a fuller translation than Tagore's own, titled "Kacha and Devayani", published in *The Fugitive* (London: Macmillan, 1921).

tapovan of ancient India. Some sections from Kalidasa's text that resonate with similar thematic concerns are cited as follows:

PRIYAMVADA. You are not the only one to feel sad at this farewell. See how the whole grove feels at parting from you.

The grass drops from the feeding doe;
The peahen stops her dance;
Pale, trembling leaves are falling slow,
The tears of clinging plants.

SHAKUNTALA (*recalling something*). Father, I must say good-bye to the spring-creeper, my sister among the vines. ... Vine sister, embrace me too with your arms, these branches. I shall be far away from you after to-day. ... Who is it that keeps pulling at my dress, as if to hinder me? ...

KANVA.

It is the fawn whose lip, when torn
By kusha-grass, you soothed with oil;
The fawn who gladly nibbled corn
Held in your hand; with loving toil
You have adopted him, and he
Would never leave you willingly.⁴

There are enough significant similarities between the two sections from the two texts in order to validate the interpretation of textual resonance. Kach's farewell to the greatest tree in the forest, singling him out as a special companion, resonates with Shakuntala's adieu to her sister vine, while similarities can be drawn with the way Kach cared for the holy cow and Kanva's account of Shakuntala's care for her fawn. Therefore, accepting that *Bidāy-Abhishāp* provides the reader an

⁴ Kalidasa. *Shakuntala*, trans. Arthur W. Ryder (reprint, Cambridge: In Parentheses, 1999), 46-47.

insight into how Tagore visualized the Vedic ashram and *tapovan*, it can be argued that Tagore's conceptualization of the Vedic model drew inspiration from Sanskrit poetic literature as well as the Vedas themselves.

While in “*Biday-Abhishaap*” Tagore describes exactly how he envisioned the Vedic *tapovan* and upheld it as an ideal, he portrays how the very opposite of that ideal could be found in the colonial school system. The tyranny and mechanical production of learning that Tagore identified as the great evil of the colonial school system, finds numerous expressions throughout Tagore's fictional prose, poetry and drama. The most popular of his fiction on education is the short story “*Totakahini*” (1918) or “The Parrot's Training” which serves as the most trenchant critique of the colonial school education system. Tagore translated the story into English himself, which indicates its importance to him. He describes how under the instruction of the King, scholars take the responsibility of training a songbird to do something they considered to be more productive than chirping songs—namely, being educated. They proceed to deny the bird of all sustenance and stuff it full of pages of books with the help of a nib. When the King comes to inspect the process, he is highly impressed as the trappings of education are so huge that the bird cannot even be noticed. When he does examine the bird, he finds that it can neither whistle nor make a sound as its throat has been choked shut with the pages of books. The King is mightily pleased with such sincere effort of the scholars in educating the bird and the result it had produced: “The Raja was satisfied that there was no flaw in the arrangements. As for any complaint from the bird itself, that simply could not be expected. Its throat was so completely choked with the leaves from the books that it could neither whistle nor whisper.”⁵ The King attains his ultimate satisfaction when the bird dies; for all that is left of the bird is a carcass stuffed full of leaves from books.

This short story becomes symbolic of the colonial education system that aimed to rob the student of all that is natural to him. It denied him the joy of life and killed his soul. It crammed the student so full of information that his throat was choked and he could not utter even a cry of protest. In the name of education, sheer cruelty was enacted upon the children of Tagore's day as a result of which they lost all their natural joy, vigour and creative spirit under the crushing and soul-deadening process of what passed as education under the colonial government. “*Totakahini*” or “The Parrot's Training” underlines a kind of inhuman violence that is enacted in the name of

⁵ Tagore, *The Parrot's Training and Other Stories* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1944), 23.

education. Even though this violence sheds no blood, it nevertheless culminates in the murder of the soul of the learner. Amlan Das Gupta points out this explicit violence and illustrates his point with reference to Martha Nussbaum:

The crucial point may well be what Martha Nussbaum points out, that ‘educationists tend to enjoy talking about themselves and their own activity, and to focus too little on the small tender children whose eagerness and curiosity should be the core of the educational endeavor. What also might be noted is the *explicit* violence of the story: ... in *Totakahini*, the violence is an integral part of the educating and civilizing process. ... the absence of a future in *Totakahini* is bleak and uncompromising. ... There is no promise of transcendence, only the oppressive consciousness of violence. *Totakahini* must rank as Rabindranath’s most frightening parable of education, and one that is difficult to relate to any system or even experiment, even the most enlightened one.⁶

The use of the description “educating and civilizing process” is strongly evocative of colonial ontology when it came to educating what they considered to be the exotic and backward natives of India, thereby allowing one to fully understand the element of violence that is an integral part of the process of colonization and locating Tagore’s educational philosophy on the other end of the spectrum, as an attempt to decolonize the education system. Tagore approached the issue of confronting the Other not by being confrontational but by being exploratory. Prasenjit Biswas describes the process, “Encounter with the Other, for Tagore, is not like an external event in which one makes up for one’s shortcomings and weaknesses or responds for the purpose of self-immunity. Rather it is a way of opening up to the Other by way of an engagement with the Infinite.”⁷ The identification of the Tagorean method of decolonization is supported by Himani Bannerji, who states that

Decolonization is a more apt expression for what Rabindranath aimed at than either anticolonialism or nationalism, ... Equally notable, however, is Rabindranath’s

⁶ Amlan Das Gupta, “Rabindranath’s Critique of Education in *Guru* and *Totakahini*,” in *The Idea of Surplus: Tagore and Contemporary Human Sciences*, ed. Mrinal Miri (New York: Routledge, 2016), 47.

⁷ Prasenjit Biswas, Introduction to *The Idea of Surplus: Tagore and Contemporary Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 8.

untiring and life-long effort to create cultural identities and social subjectivities that are substantive and independent of colonial inflections. ... Rabindranath devised a “pedagogy of decolonization” rather than engage in conventional politics, in both practical and conceptual-aesthetic terms.⁸

This Tagorean process of decolonization works in tandem with the realization and acknowledgement of the umbilical relationship of human beings with the world of nature. The mechanism of modern society represses this primordial realization thereby causing an inner spiritual impoverishment. It is this impoverishment that Tagore sought to remedy by returning to the Vedic institution of the *tapovan*. Aseem Shrivastava analyses the significance of this intrinsic relationship as revealed by Tagore’s philosophy:

For Rabindranath, in keeping with the Vedas and the Upanishads, the same consciousness that we experience as human beings permeates the entire natural world and the cosmos. This great truth is obscured from us by certain endemic illusions: we need to see past those illusions to realize ourselves by accepting the unity of all creation. Hence it is impossible to be properly human without the constant daily touch of the natural world into which we are born, and without which we cannot live for a day, though we may be seduced into believing otherwise.⁹

Tagore makes references to the educational practices prevalent in the schools of his day and the impact of those practices upon the child-mind in many short stories where the central theme is not education. That he laid prime importance upon the teacher being sympathetic and having an understanding of child psychology is something that has already been stated in the previous chapter. Two short stories, “*Ginni*” and “*Chhuti*”, demonstrate the consequences of a situation when the teacher possesses neither of these qualities. Moreover, in these stories Tagore also draws the reader’s attention to the process of thoughtless punishment that students were subjected to and how they reacted to those punishments.

⁸ Himani Bannerji, *Always Towards: Development and Nationalism in Rabindranath Tagore* (lecture, Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata, May, 2008.)

⁹ Aseem Shrivastava, “An Ecology of the Spirit,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 333.

In “*Ginni*,” (year) Tagore describes a schoolmaster, Sibnath, who has no capacity for understanding the sensitive souls of the young boys who he was entrusted to teach. Heedless of their sense of dignity, Sibnath not only punishes them physically by beating, but his verbal chastisements cut the students to the core. He has devised a cruel way of ridiculing his students by nicknaming them on the basis of their vulnerabilities. Thus, rather than protecting and nurturing these vulnerable young minds, Sibnath torments them by laying bare their vulnerabilities, innocent fears and troubles to the public. Tagore’s pen is particularly merciless in sketching the character of Sibnath, thereby conveying his utter disgust of Sibnath’s real-life counterparts who might have served as sources while creating the character of this despotic and vitriolic teacher. Tagore writes:

ইনি আক্ষেপ করিতেন, পুরাকালের মতো গুরুশিষ্যের সম্বন্ধ এখন আর নাই। ছাত্রেরা গুরুকে আর দেবতার মতো ভক্তি করে না; ... এবং মাঝে মাঝে হুংকার দিয়া উঠিতেন, কিন্তু তাহার মধ্যে এত ইতর কথা মিশ্রিত থাকিত যে তাহাকে দেবতার বজ্রনাদের রূপান্তর বলিয়া কাহারও ভ্রম হইতে পারে না। ...

... নরদেবতার মতো বালাই আর নাই। ... নরদেবগণ ... আমাদের তিলমাত্র ক্রটি হইলে চক্ষুদুটো রক্তবর্ণ করিয়া তাড়া করিয়া আসেন, তখন তাঁহাদিগকে কিছুতেই দেবতার মতো দেখিতে হয় না।¹⁰

[He expressed regret that there no longer persists the relationship between guru and disciple as it did in ancient times. Students do not revere their gurus like gods ... and he periodically roared out but those roars carried such dirty language that it could not be mistaken by anyone as a form of godly thunder. ...

... there is no such evil as a human god. ... the human gods ... come charging towards us with red eyes at our slightest mistake and then they do not, in any way, resemble the gods.]

This excerpt is particularly symptomatic of the teachers generally to be found in the colonial schools during Tagore’s time and Tagore’s biography is a clear indicator that as a student himself

¹⁰ Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 8 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1988), 502.

he attended quite a number of schools (all in vain as he did not find a congenial atmosphere in any of them) to have gained some first-hand experience of this kind of specimen of nastiness.

One victim of Sibnath's cruel mockery is Ashu, a shy, timid and hardworking boy who never dares to protest against the injustices of Sibnath. Ashu is nicknamed "*ginni*" (married lady of the house) by his teacher for the seemingly unacceptable non-normative gender role of joining his little sister in playing with dolls on a rainy day. This incident was accidentally witnessed by Sibnath, who narrates it in detail to the class and so bestows the title of "*ginni*" on young Ashu. The meaning of the word is of particular significance: not only is Ashu being tagged with a nickname but his psyche, that had so innocently provided company to a lonely sister in her games, is being branded with the forced recognition of gender roles of which Ashu had no awareness. Following Sibnath's narration, the rest of the boys join forces to mock and jeer at Ashu with chorus cries of "*ginni ginni*", leaving such a damaging imprint upon the tender mind that he is left with no other notion but to regard playing with his sister as a shameful error, forever branded upon his mind. At an impressionable age, he is indirectly indoctrinated with society's patriarchal codes.¹¹

Thus, Tagore depicts a teacher who attacks the dignity of his students, making them question their own innocent actions and self-worth and, in the process, causes lasting damage to Ashu's psyche. It is this lack of compassion that Tagore wished to correct in his school and the memorial accounts of students in the Santiniketan school clearly indicate the system of correcting students' behaviour that prevailed in that institution. This topic will be covered in detail in the following chapter.

In the other short story, "*Chhuti*" ("Holiday", 1892), the protagonist is the teenage Phatik, whose truant ways cause him to be labelled as the "bad boy". Tagore also creates the character of Makhan, Phatik's younger brother, for the purpose of demonstrating how the binary of good boy/bad boy worked in society. Makhan is the stereotypical good boy, obedient and achieving good results in school. The characterization of Phatik was inspired by Tagore's impression of a village boy and A. D. Choudhuri, in his article on Tagore's short stories, states, "...the plot of

¹¹ Ibid.

Chhuti (Homecoming, 1982) first came to his mind while he was observing a village boy on the banks of the river Padma.”¹²

Phatik is sent away from home as his truant behaviour becomes unmanageable for his mother. He has to go to the city, live under his uncle’s roof as an unwelcome guest for his aunt, and be admitted to a school in the city. Bereft of the broad riverbanks and the open countryside, Phatik’s soul begins to wither. Losing his natural habitat, he is unable to keep up with all that happens in his life, whether his unintelligible studies at school or his aunt’s jibes at home. His underperformance in school causes him to be regarded as the idle backbencher and he is beaten by his teachers regularly. It seems to the reader that nobody takes the trouble of attempting to understand the deep psychological crisis that Phatik is undergoing. There is no compassion to be had for his lack of a sense of belonging, either at school or at his uncle’s house. This long-suffering boy yearns for *chhuti*, or a leave when he would be able to go home – to the place where he truly belongs. Alas for him, that *chhuti* becomes possible only in the form of death that releases him from a world that refused to understand him.

In this story, Tagore puts forth numerous elements of his philosophy of education. When the story opens, Phatik is a happy boy frolicking on the banks of the river with his mates; this joy of existence is robbed when he is removed from close proximity with nature, as in the city, he gets no opportunity for such intimate communion. Tagore writes:

দেয়ালের মধ্যে আটকা পড়িয়া কেবলই তাহার সেই গ্রামের কথা মনে হইত।

প্রকাল একটা ঘুড়ি লইয়া বোঁ বোঁ শব্দে উড়াইয়া বেড়াইবার সেই মাঠ, “তাইরে নাইরে নাইরে না” করিয়া উচ্চঃস্বরে স্বরচিত রাগিণী আলাপ করিয়া অকর্মণ্যভাবে ঘুরিয়া বেড়াইবার সেই নদীতীর, দিনের মধ্যে যখন-তখন ঝাঁপ দিয়া পড়িয়া সাঁতার কাটিবার সেই সংকীর্ণ স্রোতস্বিনী, সেই- সব দলবল, উপদ্রব, স্বাধীনতা... তাহার নিরুপায় চিত্তকে আকর্ষণ করিত।¹³

[Being trapped within walls, he constantly remembered that village of his. That field where he could frolic away flying a huge kite, that riverbank where he could

¹² A. D. Choudhuri, “Tagore’s Short Stories,” *Indian Literature* vol. 19 no. 5 (September – October 1976), 76.

¹³ *Rabindra Rachanābali*, vol. 9, 347.

idly roam about humming a self-composed tune of nonsense, that narrow river into which he could plunge and swim at any time of the day, that group of friends, the pranks, the freedom ... all of that kept drawing at his helpless mind.]

Here Tagore has given expression to all the attributes that he felt were necessary for the true education of his students, notably the close proximity and interaction with nature, freedom and companionship; these are all features that he strove to provide for his students at his school in Santiniketan. For Phatik, the experience of being exiled to Calcutta becomes doubly-alienating owing to the disconnect he suffers from nature in his city-life. Not only does he explicitly miss the presence of his mother, he also craves the nurturing touch of the greater mother, mother nature, from whom he has gleaned most of the joys in his boyhood. S. C. Sen Gupta, in his description of this dissociation, writes, “Phatik’s misery is rendered more acute because he is an exile from his village, and in the arid surroundings of Calcutta he misses not only his human mother but also great Nature who embraced him with a mother’s warmth in the glorious meadows, the broad river banks and the narrow brooks of his village.”¹⁴

The account of “*Chhuti*” in relation to the theme of education would be incomplete without referring to the actual incidents that took place at Phatik’s school and what he had to face over there. “স্কুলে এতবড়ো নির্বোধ এবং অমনোযোগী বালক আর ছিল না। একটা কথা জিজ্ঞাসা করিলে সে হাঁ করিয়া চাহিয়া থাকিত। মাস্টার যখন মার আরম্ভ করিত তখন ভারক্লান্ত গর্দভের মতো নীরবে সহ্য করিত।”¹⁵ [There was no such dense and inattentive boy in the school. If asked anything, he stared back with a blank face. When the teacher started beating him, he silently bore the beating like a donkey sagging under the weight of its burden.] This brief yet heart-rending description of Phatik’s fate at once points towards several issues. Firstly, Phatik is labelled “নির্বোধ” (dense) and “অমনোযোগী” (inattentive), yet none of his teachers tries to find out why he is unable to follow the lessons. They are vexed by his blank stares but they make no effort to delve into the cause of his blankness. They prefer to take the easier path of beating him into submission even though it is clear that such punishment does not show any productive result on Phatik. Rather than trying to connect with the boy, his teachers choose to torment him for what they deem his natural stupidity. Even if Phatik had indeed been a naturally stupid boy, he would still have been deserving of a compassionate and

¹⁴ S. C. Sen Gupta, *The Great Sentinel* (Calcutta: A. Mukherjee & Co., 1903), 186.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

understanding treatment. But it so happens that the treatment he receives at school further injures the sensitive boy's already traumatized psyche. A. D. Choudhuri observes the way the school teacher is portrayed in Tagore's short stories:

The school teacher specially figures as the persecutor of children. Himself a truant boy in school, the poet deeply hated the conventional system of education in which the school is no better than a prison for the young mind ... Phatik in *Chhuti* or Tarapada in *Athithi* [sic] is built on the theme of the importance of freedom and affection in a child's life.¹⁶

The innate claustrophobia that the child-mind suffered from is expressed simply yet poignantly through a few lines spoken by the child-narrator in the poem "*Baijanik*" (Scientist) anthologized in *Shishu* (The Child):

সকল মাটি ছেয়ে
কোথা থেকে উঠল যে ফুল
এত রাশি রাশি।

তুই যে ভাবিস ওরা কেবল
অম্নি যেন ফুল,
আমার মনে হয় মা, তোদের
সেটা ভারি ভুল।
ওরা সব ইস্কুলের ছেলে,
পুঁথি-পত্র কাঁখে
মাটির নীচে ওরা ওদের
পাঠশালাতে থাকে।
ওরা পড়া করে
দুয়োর-বন্ধ ঘরে,
খেলতে চাইলে গুরুমশায়

¹⁶ Choudhuri, 77.

দাঁড় করিয়ে রাখে।¹⁷

[Where did all this flower spring from-
Covering all the earth-
In such great abundance?

You think that they are
Simply just flowers;
I think, Mother, that
It is very wrong.
They are all schoolboys;
Laden with books and notes,
They live below the earth
In their school.
They study
Behind locked doors.
When they want to play,
Their teacher punishes them
By keeping them standing.]

This poem brings out the pathos in the young lives of the children toiling in the colonial school as the narrator looks on flowers as innocent as him and imagines them to be schoolboys suffering the same predicament as he is familiar with. Those imagined schoolboys are trapped beneath the earth and their enclosed schoolroom conveys the disconnect with nature that they are made to undergo. Their slightest desire for freedom is immediately punished by their tyrannical teacher who holds them captive. Through this poem, Tagore foregrounds the innate desire of the child-mind for freedom – something that is also depicted in Phatik's running around freely along the river-banks in his village – and how that freedom is denied so mercilessly in the colonial school system.

¹⁷ *Rabindra Rachanabali* vol. 5, 38-39.

Tagore's educational philosophy strongly countered the binary of good student/bad student; he wished to create an environment where the joy of learning could reach the hearts of all his students without discrimination and all kinds of students – irrespective whether the most unwavering mischief-maker or the most academically weak – found a space where they could flourish as human beings. This desire to create a congenial atmosphere for learning and growing up manifests itself in the following lines of the song “বসন্তে কি কেবল ফোঁটা ফুলের মালা রে” [“In Spring, are there only garlands of blossoms”]:

আমার গুরুর পায়ের তলে শুধুই কি রে মানিক জ্বলে।

চরণে তাঁর লুটিয়ে কাঁদে লক্ষ মাটির ঢেলা রে।

আমার গুরুর আসন কাছে সুবোধ ছেলে ক জন আছে

অবোধ জনে কোল দিয়েছেন, তাই আমি তাঁর ঢেলা রে।¹⁸

[Are there only gems glittering at the feet of my guru?

At his feet, weep million clods of earth.

How many good boys surround the seat of my guru?

He spreads his lap to ignorant ones and thus I am his follower.]

This clearly explains the kind of guru Tagore envisioned for his school. His ideal guru would be one who does not reject the ignorant child; rather, he pulls the ignorant ones closest to him, considering them be to those in greatest need of his loving care and attention. Tagore's true guru is a complete subversion of the commonly found phenomenon of the best student being the teacher's pet.

Tagore's play *Chhatrer Parikkha* (Test of the Student, 1885) is a satirical representation of the impact an unsympathetic teacher has upon the student. In this play the teacher Kalachand, a private tutor, approaches teaching in a thoroughly business-like manner and relies upon his own free use of cane on the back of his hapless student as the most effective means of imparting education. The student, named Madhusudan, is weary of endless beating and decides to get rid of

¹⁸ Tagore, *Gitanitan* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1956), 508.

his tutor by displaying what he has learnt to his parent who has come to inspect a teaching session. So, when he is asked questions from history, mathematics and other subjects, he gives answers that are frustrating and do not reveal any grasp over the topic. For instance,

অভিভাবক। অঙ্কশিক্ষা হয়েছে?

মধুসূদন। হয়েছে।

অভিভাবক। আচ্ছা, তোমাকে সাড়ে ছ'টা সন্দেশ দিয়ে বলে দেওয়া হয়েছে যে, পাঁচ মিনিট সন্দেশ খেয়ে যতটা সন্দেশ বাকি থাকবে তোমার ছোটো ভাইকে দিতে হবে। একটা সন্দেশ খেতে তোমার দু-মিনিট লাগে, কটা সন্দেশ তুমি তোমার ভাইকে দেবে?

মধুসূদন। একটাও নয়।

কালচাঁদ। কেমন করে!

মধুসূদন। সবগুলো খেয়ে ফেলব। দিতে পারব না।¹⁹

[GUARDIAN: Have you learnt mathematics?

MADHUSUDAN: Yes.

GUARDIAN: Alright, suppose you are given six and a half sweets and told that after eating for five minutes, whatever number of sweets you are left with, you must give that to your younger brother. It takes you two minutes to eat one sweet. How many sweets would you give to your brother?

MADHUSUDAN: Not a single one.

KALACHAND: How so?

MADHUSUDAN: I'll eat every one of them. I cannot give away any.]

Faced with such apparent perversity, Kalachand knows only one way to counter it and that it by brandishing his cane. When he proceeds to beat Madhusudan, his student gives a highly apt answer:

¹⁹ *Rabindra Rachanabali* vol. 3, 156.

কালচাঁদ। মার না খেলে তোমার বুদ্ধি খোলে না! লক্ষ্মীছাড়া, মেরে তোমার পিঠ লাল করব,
তবে তুমি সিধে হবে।

মধুসূদন। আজে, মারের চোটে খুব সিধে জিনিসও বেঁকে যায়।²⁰

[KALACHAND: Your brain does not work without a beating. Rascal! I'll beat you
black and blue and only then you will follow a straight line.

MADHUSUDAN: With respect, beating can bend even a very straight
object.]

This play clearly demonstrates how repressive methods cannot succeed in truly teaching a child. Rather such despotic methods only torment the child to the extreme where it either surrenders and becomes a beast of burden or rebels for his freedom.

Instances of educational despotism can be found frequently in Tagore's writing. While the present discussion can, in no way, cover all of them, it is necessary to allude to Tagore's play *Achalayatan* ("The Ossified/Immovable Institution", year). *Achalayatan* had been established as a seat of learning where the students lived under the guidance of their Acharya Adinpunya and other teachers and acquired knowledge from their tutelage. But over time, the institution degenerates into a stagnant pool where no change is allowed and tradition rules supreme at the cost of truth and value of human life. In fact, the teachers at *Achalayatan* pride themselves on never deviating from the set rules and codes of behaviour at the institution. They discourage the questioning of those rules and norms vigorously and the process of questioning is viewed as blasphemous. By one arbitrary rule, everyone in the institution is strictly forbidden to open any window facing north. The crisis in the play happens when the young child Subhadra opens the window facing north. It is viewed as a crime as heinous as matricide.²¹ He is accordingly sentenced to the penance of performing the *Mahatamas* vow, which demands him to be confined in absolute darkness alone for six months.

The first point to be noted here is that *Achalayatan* treats man's natural curiosity and interrogating spirit as a dangerous crime deserving of extreme censure. This symbolically signifies how the colonial education system aimed to kill the inquisitive spirit of students while Tagore, on

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *Rabindra Rachanabali* vol. 6, 311.

the other hand, wished to awaken that very spirit of questioning that would lead to an organic process of acquiring knowledge. In the play, it is obvious that the penance prescribed for Subhadra is potentially life-threatening and far outstrips the severity of any mistake—if at all a mistake—that he has committed. Acharya Adinpunya refuses to allow Subhadra to perform such penance but his humanity is regarded as a fatal weakness by the Upacharya who urges the Acharya to follow the precedence of life-threatening penances prescribed at Achalayatan.

আচার্য। শোনো, প্রয়োজন নেই...সুভদ্রকে কোনো প্রায়শ্চিত্ত করতে হবে না...যদি কোনো অপরাধ ঘটে সে আমার। তোমাদের ভয় নেই।

উপাচার্য। এরকম দুর্বলতা তো আপনার কোনোদিন দেখি নি। এই তো সেবার অষ্টাঙ্গশুদ্ধি উপবাসে তৃতীয় রাত্রে বালক কুশলশীল "জল জল" করে পিপাসায় প্রাণত্যাগ করলে কিন্তু তবু তার মুখে এক বিন্দু জল দেওয়া গেল না তখন তো আপনি নীরব হয়ে ছিলেন। তুচ্ছ মানুষের প্রাণ আজ আছে কাল নেই, কিন্তু সনাতন ধর্মবিধি তো চিরকালের।²²

[ACHARYA: Listen, there is no need ... Subhadra need not perform any penance ... if any sin does occur, the responsibility for it belongs to me. You people need not fear.

UPACHARYA: I have never seen such weakness in you. It was not long ago that while carrying out the fast of *Ashtāngashuddhi*, on the third night the boy Kushalshil died begging for water and yet it was not possible to give a single drop to him. You were silent then. Paltry human life may be present today and absent tomorrow but ancient religious rules are everlasting.]

This extract clearly demonstrates how the teachers of Achalayatan fail to comprehend the intrinsic value of human life and the futility of rules and traditions that rob an individual of his life. When the Acharya's humanity stops him from following the codes that he had followed for years, his colleagues view it as a failure on his part to perform his duty. The knowledge of Achalayatan is confined to mantras that they memorize without knowing their meaning, and to the rituals they perform without understanding their purpose. It is a knowledge that teaches the students to despise as the Other the Shonpangshu and Darbhak communities of people who live close to Achalayatan.

²² Ibid, 317.

In Tagore's worldview, these are exactly the things that a true education would refrain from. True education would teach students to be part of the global community and serve and live with all people with respect and harmony. True knowledge would help students in understanding their purpose, thereby internalizing what they learn.

From the beginning of the play, the audience and readers are repeatedly made aware that the Guru, who had not visited Achalayatan for years, would finally be coming and thus preparations are ripe for his arrival. When Acharya is no longer sure of his path within Achalayatan, he leaves the place to wait for the arrival of the guru. As the play comes to its end, it is revealed that the Guru of Achalayatan is the Dadathakur, or revered old man, of the hated Shonpangshu community and the Gosain, or respected priest, of the despised Darbhak community, thereby signifying that a real Guru never differentiates between human beings. He is someone who inspires the sense of universal brotherhood and breaks down the false barriers that human beings erect within themselves. The Guru enters Achalayatan by breaking down the gates of the petrified place, thereby unpetrifying it and letting a new lease of life and fresh air into the near-fossilized lives of that institution. Finally, he calls for the construction of a new and harmonious institution which would be built upon the combined existence of the dwellers of Achalayatan and the Shonpangshu and Darbhak communities.

Through this play, Tagore indicates what should comprise right education as well as the real responsibility of the Guru towards inculcating that education unto his students. So he gives the following line to Dadathakur: “তা, তোমার গুরু তোমার উপর যত পুঁথির চাপই চাপান-না কেন, তার নীচ থেকে তোমাকে আশু টেনে বের করে আনতে পারব।”²³ [No matter how much your guru buries you under the burden of manuscripts, I would be able to drag you free and whole from underneath it.] It is this quality of being able to liberate the student completely that Tagore envisioned in his ideal teacher. He also signifies that real knowledge needs to have a willing acceptance of change, then only can it be dynamic and bring forth the welfare of society. The eternal cycle of destruction/deconstruction and construction must proceed unhampered because true education needs such a climate to prosper. Therefore Dadathakur confidently states: “কারাগার যা ছিল সে তো আমি ভেঙে ফেলেছি, এখন সেইখানেই তোমাকে মন্দির গাঁথে তুলতে হবে।”²⁴ [I have demolished that

²³ Ibid, 325.

²⁴ Ibid, 349.

which was a prison and now, at that very place, you have to build a temple.] Needless to say, the reference to temple here is not limited by any narrow religious sentiment; rather, it alludes to a pure and sacred space free from the ritualistic, soulless practices that defined *Achalayatan* previously.

Utpal K. Banerjee, in his analysis of *Achalayatan*, summarizes the core value of the play thus:

The symbolism of the play consists in the effective depiction of the anguished cry of the soul for liberation from the prison-house of self-made dogma and formula-ridden society. Guru, the Great Teacher, is the metaphor for a new awakening: to revive nature; remove mental poverty; reconcile opposites from the mere reign of habits; and recover fertility in a parched land with new waters of life. According to Tagore, it is a universal verity that the human soul is arrested whenever rituals overrides [sic] true religion and *Achalayatan* is a successful satire and a symbolical artistic expression of both the anguishes of the arrested soul and the divergences of a fractured society: common in every country and every age.²⁵

While this thesis indeed concurs with Banerjee's observation of the universal need of breaking free from the shackles of rigid conventions, it also seeks to emphasize that the role of the Guru is not only metaphorical as opined by Banerjee. Rather, when taken literally, the characterization of the Guru provides one with a clear understanding of the traits that Tagore hopes an ideal guru would embody. In this context, reference to Pramathnath Bisi's analysis of *Achalayatan* and the role of the Guru in this play, would be of particular relevance. He states,

এখানে লক্ষ্য করিবার বিষয় এই যে, রবীন্দ্রনাথের রচনায় যেখানেই প্রকৃত গুরুর আগমন বর্ণিত, সেইখানেই এই একই পন্থা অবলম্বিত হইয়াছে। গুরু জড়তাকে আঘাত করিয়া, বাধাকে ভাঙিয়া ফেলিয়া, সযত্নসঞ্চিত জঞ্জালকে অপসারিত করিয়া শিষ্যদের গৃহে প্রবেশ করিয়াছেন, কোন ক্ষুদ্র দয়া, নিরর্থক মমত্ব প্রকাশ করিয়া তাহাদের অপমান করেন নাই।
... অচলায়তনের গুরু ... ভ্রান্তবুদ্ধি অথচ বীর চরিত্র মহাপঞ্চককে আঘাত করিয়া তাহার

²⁵ Utpal K. Banerjee, "Symbols and Metaphors in Tagore's Drama", *Indian Literature* vol. 55 no.5 (259) (September-October 2010), 130.

প্রতি সম্মান প্রদর্শন করিয়াছেন, অন্যান্য দ্বিধাগ্রস্থ দুর্বলগণের প্রতি ফিরিয়াও তাকান নাই...²⁶

[It is to be noted here that wherever the arrival of the true guru is described in Tagore's writing, the same method has been followed. The Guru enters the home of the student by clearing his path through the destruction of deadweight and obstacles and sweeping away all carefully stored garbage. He does not insult his students by expressing any insignificant pity or meaningless affection towards them. ... the guru in *Achalayatan* ... has shown respect towards the misguided yet brave character of Mahapanchak by attacking him; towards the other hesitant and weak ones, he has paid no attention...]

The publication of *Achalayatan* had caused a considerable amount of controversy as it was alleged that the play foregrounds destruction and is a merciless attack on the rituals and mantras of Hindu religion. Of the detractors, two leading names were Akshay Kumar Dutta and Lalit Kumar Bandyopadhyay. Tagore had to defend his perspective by stating that he considers mantras and rituals meaningless when they no longer act as carriers of human conscience but seek dominance independent of any such significance.²⁷ Upendranath Bhattacharya, in his analysis of *Achalayatan*, elaborates upon the difference between true knowledge and false idea of knowledge propagated by the practice of meaningless rituals and conventions:

এই মিথ্যা জ্ঞানের প্রতি গভীর নিষ্ঠার বশবর্তী হইয়া মানুষ চারিদিকের সংস্পর্শ বাঁচাইবার জন্য উঁচু প্রাচীর তোলে, তাহাদের গভীর বাহিরের সকলকে অস্পৃশ্য ও অন্ত্যজ বলিয়া ধারণা করে। ... এই সংকীর্ণ জ্ঞান-পন্থা-অনুসরণকারীরা একটা অভ্যাস ও আচারের মধ্যে জ্ঞানকে অবরুদ্ধ করিয়া উহাকে শুষ্ক, কঠিন, অনড় পাষাণের আকারে পরিণত করে। এই অবস্থাই প্রকৃত জ্ঞান-সাধন পথের বাধা।²⁸

[Being under the influence of deep devotion towards this false knowledge, man erects a high wall in order to keep away any contact with the world around him; he regards everyone outside that limit to be untouchable and low-born. ... these people who follow this narrow path of knowledge constrict knowledge in habits and rituals, thereby turning it into dry,

²⁶ Pramathnath Bisi, *Rabindranatyaprabaha* vol. 2 (Calcutta: Mitralaya, 1951), 80.

²⁷ Ibid, 81.

²⁸ Upendranath Bhattacharya, *Rabindranatyaparikrama* (Calcutta: Orient, 1959), 232-233.

immovable stone. It is this condition that presents a hindrance to the path of endeavouring towards true knowledge.]

It is this false knowledge, which can so effectively delude the human mind, that Tagore identifies and attacks in *Achalayatan*. Bhattacharya further infers, from his analysis of *Achalayatan*, that there is an intrinsic connection between knowledge, action and love where the three need to be blended harmoniously in order to attain the perfect state of spirituality. He states, “জ্ঞানের সঙ্গে প্রেমের যোগ না হইলে জ্ঞান হইবে শুষ্ক, পাষণবৎ কঠিন ও অচল; কর্মের সহিত জ্ঞানের যোগ না হইলে কর্ম হইবে শক্তির আস্থালন, উদ্দেশ্যহীন, অর্থহীন দৈহিক চাঞ্চল্য ও পীড়াদায়ক বন্ধন।”²⁹ [If there is no connection between love and knowledge, knowledge would be dry, stony hard and petrified. If knowledge has no link with action, action would become a flaunting of strength, a purposeless and meaningless physical movement and a painful bondage.]

The plot of *Achalayatan* signifies the importance of harmonious blending of knowledge, action and love that is inevitable in order for learning to be harmonious and organically connected with the life-force. The centuries-old rituals and conventions that *Achalayatan* as an institution was clinging to prior to the arrival of the Guru, were devoid of their necessary connection with action and love. Thus, they were foredoomed to futility. Tagore demonstrates that through a dialogue with a Darbhak:

পঞ্চক। দে ভাই, আমায় মন্ত্রতন্ত্র সব ভুলিয়ে দে, আমার বিদ্যাসাধি সব কেড়ে নে, দে আমাকে তোদের ঐ গান শিখিয়ে দে।

প্রথম দর্ভক। আমাদের গান?

পঞ্চক। হাঁ রে হাঁ, ঐ অধমের গান, অক্ষমের গান।³⁰

[Panchak: My brother, do make me forget all the mantras – take away all my learning – just teach me that song you sing.]

First Darbhak: Our song?

Panchak: Yes, yes. That song of the downtrodden, that weeping of the powerless.]

²⁹ Ibid, 232.

³⁰ *Rabindra Rachanabali* vol. 6, 336.

Through this, Tagore demonstrates how the knowledge practised and hoarded at Achalayatan was never applied to realize the intrinsic connection that runs between all human beings nor was it ever utilized to allay the suffering of the powerless downtrodden of this world. It is the lack of this connection that had rendered the knowledge of Achalayatan petrified and redundant as it was completely oblivious of the truth of man as a social being. Tagore explains this idea in greater detail in “An Eastern University”:

... we are condemned to carry to the end a dead load of dumb wisdom. Like miserable outcasts, we are deprived of our place in the festival of culture, and wait at the outer court, where the colours are not for us, nor the forms of delight, nor the songs. Ours is the education of a prison-house, with hard labour and with a drab dress cut to the limits of minimum decency and necessity.³¹

Even though this essay by Tagore is independent of *Achalayatan*, it can still be used to interpret the subject-matter of the play. Despite the presence of such explanations as well as critical commentaries from scholars like Banerjee, Bisi and Bhattacharya, *Achalayatan* remains burdened by controversies and divisiveness even so many years after its conception. The fact that Indian society has refused to remove its blinkers and truly understand the core values of the play is testified by Ananda Lal who writes, “*Achalāyatan* (The Immovable Institution, 1911), which parodies the rigid, frequently unjust beliefs of orthodox Hinduism, in turn faced denunciation from conservative Bengalis, and even now finds few takers to stage its volatile subject.”³²

While *Achalayatan* demonstrates educational despotism by portraying the danger of clinging on to fossilized rituals and practices irrespective of their relevance to one’s life, the play *Muktadhara* (The Waterfall) demonstrates the evil that mindless indoctrination can be in the field of education.

রণজিৎ । বিভূতি কী করেছে এরা সবাই জানে তো?

³¹ *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* vol. 2, ed. Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), 257.

³² Ananda Lal, “Rabindranath Tagore: Drama and Performance”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 106.

ছেলেরা। (লাফাইয়া হাততালি দিয়া) জানি, শিবতরাইয়ের খাবার জল বন্ধ করে দিয়েছেন।

রণজিৎ। কেন দিয়েছেন?

ছেলেরা। (উৎসাহে) ওদের জব্দ করার জন্যে।

রণজিৎ। কেন জব্দ করা?

ছেলেরা। ওরা যে খারাপ লোক।

রণজিৎ। কেন খারাপ?

ছেলেরা। ওরা খুব খারাপ, ভয়ানক খারাপ, সবাই জানে।

রণজিৎ। কেন খারাপ তা জান না?

গুরু। জানে বৈকি, মহারাজ। কী রে, তোরা পড়িস নি— বইয়ে পড়িস নি— ওদের ধর্ম খুব খারাপ—

ছেলেরা। হাঁ, হাঁ, ওদের ধর্ম খুব খারাপ।

গুরু। আর ওরা আমাদের মতো— কী বল্-না— (নাক দেখাইয়া)

ছেলেরা। নাক উঁচু নয়।

গুরু। আচ্ছা, আমাদের গণাচার্য কী প্রমাণ করে দিয়েছেন— নাক উঁচু থাকলে কী হয়?

ছেলেরা। খুব বড়ো জাত হয়।

গুরু। তারা কী করে? বল্-না— পৃথিবীতে— বল্— তারাই সকলের উপর জয়ী হয়, না?

ছেলেরা। হাঁ, জয়ী হয়।

গুরু। উত্তরকূটের মানুষ কোনোদিন যুদ্ধে হেরেছে জানিস?

ছেলেরা। কোনোদিনই না।

গুরু। আমাদের পিতামহ-মহারাজ প্রাগ্জিৎ দুশো তিরেনব্বই জন সৈন্য নিয়ে একত্রিশ হাজার সাড়ে সাতশো দক্ষিণী বর্বরদের হটিয়ে দিয়েছিলেন না?

ছেলেরা। হাঁ, দিয়েছিলেন।

গুরু। নিশ্চয়ই জানবেন, মহারাজ, উত্তরকূটের বাইরে যে হতভাগারা মাতৃগর্ভে জন্মায়, একদিন এই-সব ছেলেরাই তাদের বিভীষিকা হয়ে উঠবে। এ যদি না হয় তবে আমি

মিথ্যে গুরু। কতবড়ো দায়িত্ব যে আমাদের সে আমি একদণ্ডও ভুলি নে। আমরাই তো মানুষ তৈরি করে দিই, আপনার অমাত্যরা তাঁদের নিয়ে ব্যবহার করেন।³³

[RANAJIT: I hope they know what Bibhuti has done.

THE BOYS (*jumping eagerly and clapping their hands*): Yes, we know. He has stopped the supply of drinking water to Shibtarai.

RANAJIT: Why has he done so?

THE BOYS (*excitedly*): To teach them a lesson.

RANAJIT: Why do they need a lesson?

THE BOYS: They are very bad people.

RANAJIT: Why are they bad?

THE BOYS: They are very bad, terribly bad – everyone knows that.

RANAJIT: Don't you know why they are bad?

GURU: Indeed, they know, my king. Why boys, have you not read in your books – their religion is a very bad one...

THE BOYS: Yes, yes, their religion is very bad.

GURU: And they are not like us – go ahead, say it (*points at his nose*) ...³⁴

THE BOYS: Their nose is not high.

GURU: What has our highest astrologer proven? What does having a high nose mean?

THE BOYS: It means that the caste is very high.

GURU: What do those people do? Go on, tell me – they win over everybody else, don't they?

THE BOYS: Yes, they become winners.

GURU: Have you heard of people from Uttarkut ever losing in any war?

THE BOYS: No, never.

GURU: Didn't our forefather, the great king Pragjit manage to drive away thirty-one thousand, seven hundred and fifty southern barbarians with two hundred and ninety-three soldiers?

THE BOYS: Yes, he did.

³³ *Rabindra Rachanabali* vol. 7, 342.

³⁴ In Bengali, nose is a metaphor for an individual's prestige.

GURU: Know it for sure, my King, these boys would one day become terror to those hapless ones who are born outside Uttarkut. If this does not come to pass, then I am a false guru. I never forget the great responsibility that lies with us. It is we who mould characters and our nobles make use of them.]

Over here, Tagore has emphasized how education can easily be perverted and made into a tool for mass indoctrination by both the state and parties interested. The Guru in this play teaches his students to abhor anyone outside the kingdom of Uttarkut simply for being outsiders thereby inculcating in them both the hatred of the cultural other as well as an inherent sense of superiority and entitlement for being racially superior. The education of Uttarkut teaches its students that depriving someone of drinking water is justified simply because that person is an other, a supposed racial inferior. The racial hierarchy is instilled within their young minds by the simple statement that the religion followed by anyone outside Uttarkut is a bad religion thereby almost ensuring that by the time these students grow into adults they would become rabid fanatics and would cause unimaginable horrors by their xenophobia and zealotry. Tagore adds a twist to the scenario by making it evident that the Guru knows exactly how he is occupying the most advantageous position from where he can exploit his power over young, impressionable minds to create monsters for the future. Thus, Tagore effectively demonstrates how false education, in wrong hands, can wreak havoc on entire human population. By doing so, Tagore is also reminding his contemporary world and the posterity, of the immense responsibility that any education system has in preventing the nurturing of racial discrimination, religious fanaticism and any sense of cultural superiority that can lead to the othering of other cultures.

Tagore's philosophy of education finds expression in a number of plays many of which were staged by Tagore and his students thereby living the beliefs that they were teaching and learning at the school in Santiniketan.

Even in his creative writings- where education is not the thematic focus- Tagore illustrates his understanding of what constitutes true knowledge. A simple example of such an illustration can be cited from his play *Tasher Desh*:

ছক্কা। ... এ-সমস্তের অর্থ কী।

পঞ্জা। ঐ যে দহলা পণ্ডিত আসছেন, ঔঁকে জিজ্ঞাসা করি ।

দহলার প্রবেশ

ছক্কা। এতকাল যে-সব ওঠাপড়া- শোওয়াবসার কোট্‌কেনা নিয়ে দিন কাটাচ্ছিলুম তার অর্থ কী। [sic]

দহলা। চুপ।

ছক্কা- পঞ্জা। (উভয়ে) করব না চুপ।

দহলা। ভয় নেই?

ছক্কা- পঞ্জা। (উভয়ে) নেই ভয়, বলতে হবে অর্থ কী।

দহলা। অর্থ নেই- নিয়ম।

ছক্কা। নিয়ম যদি নাই মানি?

দহলা। অধঃপাতে যাবে।

ছক্কা। যাব সেই অধঃপাতেই।

দহলা। কী করতে। [sic]

পঞ্জা। সেখানে যদি অগৌরব থাকে তার সঙ্গে লড়াই করতে।³⁵

[CHHAKKA: ...what is the meaning of all this?

PANJA: There—Dahala Pandit is coming here; let us ask him.

Enter Dahala

CHHAKKA: What is the meaning of all the codes of behaviour that we have been following since such a long time?

DAHALA: Silence.

CHHAKKA-PANJA: (*together*) We won't be silent.

DAHALA: Have you no fear?

³⁵ Ibid, vol. 12, 251-252.

CHHAKKA–PANJA: (*together*) No, we do not. You have to tell us the meaning.

DAHALA: There is no meaning—only the rules.

CHHAKKA: If we do not follow the rules?

DAHALA: You would be ruined.

CHHAKKA: We would go to meet that ruin.

DAHALA: To what purpose?

PANJA: To fight any indignity that lies there.]

This entire section is a demonstration of how people in the position of power use rules and a façade of knowledge in order to brainwash the larger section of the population. Dahala Pandit in *Tāsher Desh* is an instance of such an authority figure. Thus, when questioned by Chhakka and Panja, his first response is to quell their questioning spirit and silence the doubts about the authoritarian rules that are springing up in their minds. Upon failing to impose that silence, he takes recourse to employing the next best strategy i.e. the path of fear. He threatens that anyone who refuses to follow the rules, would be ruined. However, neither Chhakka nor Panja is scared to meet their ruin; they defiantly state that they would meet their ruin and fight against indignity if there be any. It is this paradigmatic shift in attitude of the characters that is described by Banerjee as “the turning of the psychological tide in the Card-characters.”³⁶

This section can be interpreted as a symbolic representation, where the codes and rules propounded by Dahala Pandit signify the maxims of colonial education that were crammed down the throats of students as the absolute truth and, in the process, kill their capacity for original thinking and independent action. In the background of the freedom struggle that India was fighting in that period, it can be said that Tagore wanted to create an educational system that would encourage free and original thinking, where future citizens would grow up to be independent-minded rather than indoctrinated. His educational mission was another means of resisting the process of colonization and preparing the youth of his day to become good future citizens of free India and the world.

³⁶ Banerjee, 139.

Just as Tagore demonstrates the false kind of education, his writing also captures the ideal education that he wished to impart to his pupils in Santiniketan. His derision of bookish knowledge that has no connection to reality and thus does not pulsate with life is clearly conveyed by this interchange in the play *Shāradotsab* (*Autumn-Festival*, year):

ঠাকুরদাদা। প্রণাম হই, আপনি কে?

সন্ন্যাসী। আমি ছাত্র।

ঠাকুরদাদা। আপনি ছাত্র?

সন্ন্যাসী। হ্যাঁ, পুঁথিপত্র সব পোড়াবার জন্য বের হয়েছি।

ঠাকুরদাদা। ও ঠাকুর, বুঝেছি। বিদ্যের বোঝা সমস্ত ঝেড়ে ফেলে দিব্যি একেবারে হালকা হয়ে সমুদ্রে পাড়ি দেবেন!

সন্ন্যাসী। চোখের পাতার উপরে পুঁথির পাতাগুলো আড়াল করে খাড়া হয়ে দাঁড়িয়েছে, সেইগুলো খসিয়ে ফেলতে চাই।³⁷

[GRANDFATHER: My most respectful greeting! Who are you?

SANYASI: I am a student.

GRANDFATHER: You a student?

SANYASI: Yes, I have set out to burn all books.

GRANDFATHER: Now I understand, sir. You would set sail across the seas shaking free of all the burden of learning.

SANYASI: The pages from the books are standing like barriers in front of my eyes; I want to shake them off.]

It is evident that mere bookish knowledge is so futile that it becomes a burden that is necessary to get rid of in order to advance in life. Real knowledge, on the other hand, is internalized and never becomes a burden. Rather than blocking one's vision, it aids one in seeing the truth.

³⁷ Ibid, vol. 4, 375. Tagore translated the play into English as *Autumn-Festival*, but I have translated the extracts here anew.

The students of Tagore's school were actively involved in the productions of plays such as *Shāradotsab* and *Phālguni*. Rather than being boggled by the complexities of Tagore's philosophy of education, they imbibed the living truth of it simply and naturally through the enactment of those beliefs as embodied by various positive characters in these plays. *Shāradotsab* clearly demonstrates how a truly honest person can honour a debt that he himself has not directly incurred but has inherited as a result of someone else's actions. Upananda takes upon himself the responsibility of paying the debts of his guru after the latter's death even when there is no material reason why he should tie himself down with such an onerous burden. This becomes, at once, a commentary on what constitutes one's duty as well as the spiritual ties between a guru and his disciple even when the former is no longer in this world. Tagore's play lucidly conveys these highly significant ideas that the performers would imbibe organically without having to resort to any didactic, abstract lecture on the topic.

প্রথম বালক। ভাই উপনন্দ, এসো ভাই! আমরা আজ সন্ন্যাসীঠাকুরের চেলা
সেজেছি, তুমিও চলো আমাদের সঙ্গে। তুমি হবে সর্দার চেলা।

উপনন্দ। না ভাই, আমার কাজ আছে।

ছেলেরা। কিচ্ছু কাজ নেই, তুমি এসো।

উপনন্দ। আমার পুঁথি নকল করতে অনেকখানি বাকি আছে। ...

সন্ন্যাসী। (পাশে বসিয়া) বাছা, তুমি কী কাজ করছ? আজ তো কাজের দিন না।

উপনন্দ। (সন্ন্যাসীর মুখের দিকে ক্ষণকাল চাহিয়া, পায়ের ধুলা লইয়া) আজ ছুটির
দিন। কিন্তু আমার ঋণ আছে, শোধ করতে হবে, তাই আজ কাজ করছি।

ঠাকুরদাদা। উপনন্দ, জগতে তোমার আবার ঋণ কিসের ভাই?

উপনন্দ। ঠাকুরদাদা, আমার প্রভু মারা গিয়েছেন, তিনি লক্ষেশ্বরের কাছে ঋণী –
সেই ঋণ আমি পুঁথি লিখে শোধ দেব।

ঠাকুরদাদা। হায় হায়, তোমার মতো কাঁচা বয়সের ছেলেকেও ঋণ শোধ করতে হয়!
আর এমন দিনেও ঋণশোধ! – ঠাকুর, আজ নতুন উত্তরে হাওয়ায় ও পারের কাশের বনে
চেউ দিয়েছে, এ পারে ধানের খেতের সবুজে চোখ একেবারে ডুবিয়ে দিলে, শিউলিবন থেকে

আকাশ আজ পুজোর গন্ধ ভরে উঠেছে, এরই মাঝখানে ঐ ছেলেটি আজ ঋগশোধের আয়োজনে বসে গেছে – এও কি চক্ষু দেখা যায়?

সন্ন্যাসী। বল কী, এর চেয়ে সুন্দর কি আর কিছু আছে! ঐ ছেলেটিই তো আজ সারদার বরপুত্র হয়ে তাঁর কোল উজ্জ্বল করে বসেছে। তিনি তাঁর আকাশের সমস্ত সোনার আলো দিয়ে ওকে বুকে চেপে ধরেছেন। আহা, আজ এই বালকের ঋগশোধের মতো শুভ্র ফুলটি কি কোথাও ফুটেছে – চেয়ে দেখো তো! লেখো, লেখো বাবা, তুমি লেখো, আমি দেখি। তুমি পণ্ডিতের পর পণ্ডিত লিখছ, আর ছুটির পর ছুটি পাচ্ছ। তোমার এত ছুটির আয়োজন আমরা তো পন্দ করতে পারব না। দাও বাবা, একটা পুঁথি আমাকে দাও, আমিও লিখি। এমন দিনটা সার্থক হোক।³⁸

[FIRST BOY: Upananda, my friend, come, friend! Today we have dressed up as the followers of Sanyasi *Thākūr* – you come along with us as well. You would be the leader of the followers.

UPANANDA: No, my friend. I have work to do.

THE BOYS: No, there is no work – you come along.

UPANANDA: There is a lot left of my copying of manuscripts. ...

SANYASI: (*sitting down by him*) Child, what work are you doing? Today is not a day for working.

UPANANDA: (*stares at Sanyasi's face for a while and touches his feet*) Today is a holiday. But I have a debt and I need to pay that – so I am working today.

THAKURDADA: Upananda, what debt can you possibly have in this world?

UPANANDA: Thakurdada, my master has passed away; he was in debt to Laksheshwar – I would pay that debt through copying manuscripts.

THAKURDADA: Alas! alas! A boy as young as you also has to pay debts! And that too on such a day! – God, today the fresh winds from the north are making

³⁸ Ibid, vol. 4, 379.

waves in the fields of *kāsh* flowers on the other side while on this side the green from the paddy field is overwhelming the eyes; the fragrance of Puja emanating from the masses of *shiuli* permeates the sky and in the midst of it all, this boy has settled down in order to pay debts! How can our eyes possibly bear such a sight?

SANYASI: What are you saying? Is there anything more beautiful? It is this boy who has illumined the lap of Sharada as her chosen son. She is holding him close to her heart through all the golden light of her sky. Look around you – can you see a whiter flower than this boy’s efforts to pay debts blooming anywhere? Write, write my son, you write and I will see you writing. As you write line after line – you secure for yourself holiday after holiday. We cannot possibly destroy your arrangement for so many holidays. Give me a manuscript, my son; I will write as well. May such a day be fulfilled.]

Through such a portrayal of dutifulness, Tagore conveys the dignity and pure beauty of discharging one’s duty with honour and sincerity. Rather than being repelled by the drudgery of the task, Tagore delves into the core of the matter, thereby revealing the mundane or the apparently mechanical process to be a glorious deed that truly fulfils the purpose of man on earth, completing which he is secure of a real holiday where any bleakness would not be able to reach him. The profoundness of this thought would reach Tagore’s students not via classes of moral study that were and still are so common in schools. It was Tagore’s aim that his students would imbibe these values naturally and understand the significance of these eternal truths via their reading and performing of these plays.

The enactment of plays was a necessary part of education in the Brahmavidyalaya and Tagore composed plays annually during those early years at Santiniketan. *Phālguni* (*The Cycle of Spring*, year) was one such drama where Tagore returned to the concept of the deep relation between work and play and how they need to go hand in hand. In it he also attacks soulless pedantic learning that does not lead to true knowledge. Tagore regards real knowledge to be something that emanates from an innate truth –it is not something that requires annotations in order to be comprehensible. True knowledge, to him, is something that appeals to an individual’s spontaneous understanding; it is something to be realized and not explained via annotations. *Phālguni* captures this Tagorean ideal in the following manner:

ঐ রে দাদা এবার চৌপদী বের করবে। ...

চন্দ্রহাস। না দাদা, তুমি ওদের কথায় কান দিয়ে না। শোনাও তোমার চৌপদী। কেউ না টিকতে পারে আমি শেষ পর্যন্ত টিকে থাকব। ...

দাদা। আচ্ছা, তবে তোরা শোন –

বংশে শুধু বংশী যদি বাজে

বংশ তবে ধ্বংস হবে লাজে।

বংশ নিঃস্ব নহে বিশ্বমাঝে

যেহেতু সে লাগে বিশ্বকাজে।

আর-একটু ধৈর্য ধরো ভাই, এর মানেরটা –

আবার মানে!

একে চৌপদী – তার উপর আবার মানে। ...

আমরা বুঝব না

কোনোমতেই বুঝব না।

কার সাধ্য আমাদের বোঝায়। ...

দাদা। ও শ্লোকটার অর্থ হচ্ছে এই যে, বিশ্বের হিত যদি না করি তবে –

তবে? তবে বিশ্ব হাঁপ ছেড়ে বাঁচে। ...

দাদা। তোরা অত ব্যস্ত হচ্ছিস কেন বল তো। বিশেষ কাজ আছে? ...

বসন্তের ছুটিতে আমাদের খেলাটা কী হবে তাই খুঁজে বের করতে বেরিয়েছি।

দাদা। খেলা? দিনরাতই খেলা?

সকলে।

গান

মোদের যেমন খেলা তেমনি যে কাজ

জানিস নে কি ভাই।

তাই কাজকে কভু আমরা না ডরাই।
 খেলা মোদের লড়াই করা,
 খেলা মোদের বাঁচা মরা,
 খেলা ছড়া কিছুই কোথাও নাই।³⁹

[Oh no! Dada will now bring out his four-liner. ...

CHANDRAHAS: No Dada, do not pay attention to them. Read out your four-liner.
 If no one can bear it, I will endure till the end. ...

DADA: Alright, then hear me. all –

If bamboo created only the flute,

The bamboo would perish in shame.

Bamboo has not lost everything in the world

As it serves the purposes of the world.

Be a little more patient, my brother. It means –

Its meaning! On top of everything else!

Not only a four-liner but its meaning as well! ...

DADA: The significance of the verse is that if we are not of service to the world,
 the –

Then? Then the world would sigh in relief. ...

DADA: Why are you all in such hurry? Do you have some important work?

We are out looking for the game we will play on our spring holiday.

DADA: Game? Do you play all day and night?

³⁹ Ibid, vol. 6, 392-393. The authorized English translation titled *The Cycle of Spring* is credited to Tagore, but I have translated the extracts here anew.

EVERYONE:

Song

Like our game, so is our work

Don't you know, my friend?

Thus we don't ever fear work

Our game is our fight to live

Our game is our life and death

There's nothing anywhere but our game.]

Tagore returns to this concept of the games that children play and their profound significance in the working of the world in *Gitanjali* where, in song 60, he states:

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. ...

They build their houses with sand and they play with empty shells.
With withered leaves they weave their boats and smilingly float them on the
vast deep. Children have their play on the seashore of worlds.⁴⁰

This is indicative of Tagore's faith in the innocence of children and the way in which this innocence created a connection between them and the greater beyond. Tagore's writing celebrates the imaginative spirit of children that propelled them towards greater understanding of life. It is this innocence and imaginativeness that Tagore sought to safeguard and cherish through his school in Santiniketan. It is another reason why he vehemently and equally criticizes both the colonial school system as well as the ossified pedagogy of Indian orthodoxy, because they punish the imaginative and sensitive child-mind and trample over its innocence by treating it as a machine whose purpose is mere rote learning. Tagore wished to facilitate the free working of the imaginative child-mind by setting it free in the vast playground of nature. The immense significance of Tagore's seasonal plays vis-à-vis education gets further heightened when they are put in the context of our modern-day emphasis on environmental studies that occupies a prominent

⁴⁰ Tagore, *Gitanjali* (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 2003), 153.

place in the curriculum of school education in contemporary India. Ananda Lal highlights this idea as he states:

... a sea change occurred in Tagore's theatrical vistas, starting with the first of his plays about the seasons, *Shāradotsab* (Autumn Festival, 1908), on the season of fulfillment. Prior to this, no major dramatist in the world had written scripts foregrounding nature. The cliché ... goes that European drama depicts humankind usually in conflict with natural forces, striving to control their power. Tagore instead stressed the healing, immanent bond between nature and humanity and, as such, became the first theatrical exponent of the Green Movement much before it had become a movement. Deep ecology and environmental consciousness, so significant on paper in India's school system, begins with *Shāradotsab* and the cycle that followed it: *Phālguni* (Play of Phālgun, Month of Spring, 1915), *Basanta* (Spring, 1923), *Shesh barshan* (Last Rainfall, 1925), *Sundar* (The Beautiful, 1926) ...⁴¹

Tagore trusted the innate simplicity of the child to sense the truth at the core of his creations. That is why once, when he was questioned about the underlying significance of his poem “*Sonār Tari*” (“The Golden Boat”), he summoned the young students of his school and asked them to state their understanding of it. One of them, Amita Sen—also known as Khuku—narrated her understanding in a simple, straightforward manner. A satisfied Tagore remarked: “দেখছেন তো, আমার ইঙ্কলের ছেলেমেয়েরা যা এত সহজে বুঝতে পারে, বিদ্বান ব্যক্তিদের সেই কবিতার মানে খুঁজে বার করতে এত পরিশ্রম কেন বলুন তো।”⁴² [“You can see, what the students of my school can understand so easily, why do intellectual people need to give so much effort in divining the significance of that very poem?”]

It was the methods that Tagore employed in teaching his students that allowed such development of their natural faculties and allowed them to read, understand and enjoy poems in their own way, that were deemed complex by intellectual minds.

⁴¹ Lal, 105-106.

⁴² Amita Sen, *Santiniketane Ashramkanya* (Kolkata: Tagore Research Institute, 2002), 37.

Finally, two simple lines from “*Prashna*” (“Question”) in Tagore’s *Shishu* – a book of poems written particularly for children and where children are the first-person narrators – a young student piteously pleads with his mother:

মা গো, আমায় ছুটি দিতে বল,
সকাল থেকে পড়েছি যে মেলা।
এখন আমি তোমার ঘরে বসে
করব শুধু পড়া-পড়া খেলা।⁴³

[Mother dear, do tell them to give me a recess,
I have studied so much since morning.
Now, in the cosiness of you room,
I would play a game of learning.]

It is here, in the childish request to be granted a break and be given the freedom to play a “game of learning”, that one derives the essence of what Tagore wished to impart to the mind of his child-student. Tagore’s educational philosophy oriented itself around the idea of setting the child-mind free to embark on a journey of discovery, where every day he would glean joy from knowledge acquired from some new discovery. Rather than being burdened by dry bookish learning, Tagore’s system of education aimed at maintaining a spirit of playfulness that would never make the process of learning cumbersome for young minds.

An important aspect in the discussion of Tagore’s philosophy of school education being his stance towards female education, the short story “Postmaster” is relevant as there Tagore poignantly refers to female education by underlining the absence of the same for girls throughout rural Bengal. The story talks about the orphaned child-woman Ratan who looks after the protagonist’s domestic needs. She has never had the opportunity of being educated till the postmaster takes upon himself the responsibility of teaching her.

⁴³ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 5, 20-21.

পোস্টমাস্টার একটা দীর্ঘনিশ্বাস ফেলিয়া ডাকিলেন, “রতন”। রতন তখন পেয়ারাতলায় পা ছড়াইয়া দিয়া কাঁচা পেয়ারা খাইতেছিল; প্রভুর কণ্ঠস্বর শুনিয়া অবিলম্বে ছুটিয়া আসিল— হাঁপাইতে হাঁপাইতে বলিল, “দাদাবাবু ডাকছ?” পোস্টমাস্টার বলিলেন, “তোকে আমি একটু একটু করে পড়তে শেখাব।” বলিয়া সমস্ত দুপুরবেলা তাহাকে লইয়া ‘স্বরে অ’ ‘স্বরে আ’ করিলেন। এবং এইরূপে অল্পদিনেই যুক্ত-অক্ষর উত্তীর্ণ হইলেন।⁴⁴

[The Postmaster sighed heavily and called out, “Ratan”. Ratan was then sitting with her legs outspread under the guava tree and munching on a raw guava; hearing her master’s voice she came running without wasting any time. Panting, she asked, “Did you call me, Dadababu?”⁴⁵ The Postmaster said, “I will slowly teach you to read.” Saying so, he spent the whole afternoon teaching alphabets to her. In this way, they quickly progressed to compound letters.]

This passage highlights both Ratan’s readiness to acquire education as well as her natural intelligence and grasp over her lessons that allow her to quickly progress in her learning. The combination of this natural learning ability with the lack of opportunity to learn, evokes the pathos of the situation and emphasizes upon the unfairness of the society in deprives girls of education. This reference to female education by its absence is particularly significant as Tagore’s educational mission was aimed at remedying this critical issue as well. In spite of Tagore’s stance in his essay “*Stree Shiksha*” (Female Education) (already discussed in Chapter Three) being a problematic one, Tagore was definitely a believer in educating women and he manifested his intention by opening the female section in his Brahmacharyashram. The details of that female section would be discussed in the following chapter.

⁴⁴ *Rabindra Rachanabali* vol. 8, 500.

⁴⁵ “*Dadababu*” is a common Bengali mode of addressing where the familial word “*dada*” meaning elder brother, is combined with the honorific “*babu*”.

CHAPTER V

BRAHMAVIDYALAYA: A MEMORIAL RECONSTRUCTION

The thrust hitherto has been to delineate the principles and methodological elements that constitute Tagore's philosophy of school education. The purpose of this chapter is to validate that methodology by citing detailed examples and descriptions of Santiniketan life gleaned from the memorial accounts of students, teachers, visitors and parents of students of that particular period. There are numerous accounts that allow readers to not only glimpse, but to actually familiarize themselves with the day-to-day activity of the school starting from the inaugural day to the minutiae of the stumbling blocks that were part of the early life of this school that was deemed as an experiment of the romantic-minded poet by his contemporaries. A reconstruction would enable the reader to understand exactly how Tagore was putting into action his educational philosophy in cultivating the mental and physical development of his students. It also gives an insight to how the significance of the Vedic tradition evolved in the mind of this educator as he faced the everyday necessities of running an actual residential school.

GERMINATION

As Tagore was a firm opposer of the way the colonial school system worked, it is of greatest interest to see how he designed the daily life of his pupils – the way lessons were imparted, what constituted those lessons, how the students learned, how their learning was evaluated, what they did besides learning, what means to amusement and entertainment were available to them, what they ate and how they conducted themselves as a whole. It needs to be stated that before Tagore advanced with his educational enterprise, Balendranath Tagore, his nephew, had conceptualized the foundation of a Brahmavidyalaya and it was under his onus that a house was constructed some distance away from Maharshi Devendranath's "*Santiniketan*" house that constituted the earliest building for the purpose of education at Santiniketan. Balendranath Tagore had also written down twelve fundamental rules for the intended school that never materialized. Those rules were strong in their Brahma character and reminiscent of the Maharshi's primary intent in setting up a

residence at Santiniketan – that of the place serving as a spiritual retreat.¹ Tagore’s school did not adopt those rules as its formative regulations and there were numerous marked departures from Balendranath’s founding principles. Where Balendranath stated that the first purpose of the school would be to prepare the students for the Entrance examination, Tagore was completely against the examination-oriented approach and focused on the development of his students. Balendranath laid down that only ten students would be allowed to reside and learn free of charge, while if more than ten were to seek admission, each would have to pay a monthly fee of ten rupees.² On the other hand, Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, in his book *Brahmavidyalaya* that forms the first written history of the school, clearly states that when the school was opened, it charged no fees of any kind from the students. It was only a few years later when the expenses of the school were proving to be completely beyond Tagore’s means, that the system of fees was introduced at Brahmavidyalaya.³ This fact is further corroborated by Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, parent to one of the earliest students. He writes that even though he was elated at the prospect of his son being educated at Tagore’s school, being a man of limited means, he was apprehensive of the cost and wrote to the poet asking about the expenses. Tagore replied, “আমি তোমার ছেলেকে পাঠাইতে বলিয়াছি, তুমি খরচের কথা লিখিয়াছকেন? ... তোমার ছেলের জন্য এক পয়সাও তোমাকে দিতে হইবে না।”⁴ [I asked you to send your son – why have you asked about the expense? ... you would not need to pay a paisa for your son.]

Both these instances are clearly indicative of the difference between the school envisioned by Balendranath and the school founded by Rabindranath. Tagore’s school ran largely in accordance with the instructions penned by him in his 1902 letter to Kunjalal Ghosh, but owing to the numerous changes in the administration of the school in its early years, there was a good of lack of organization, an arbitrariness and, in some cases, confusion in the initial daily operation.

Thus, Rabindranath’s Brahmavidyalaya, strongly bearing the character of Tagore’s own philosophy, opened its doors for its first batch of students. One of the teachers of the school,

¹ Swati Ghosh & Ashok Sarkar. *Kabir Pathshala: Pathabavana o Shiksha Satrer Itihaash* (Kolkata: Signet, 2015), 9-10. w

² Ibid.

³ Ajit Kumar Chakravarty. *Brahmavidyalaya* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1951), 19.

⁴ Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, “Visvabharatir Ankur” in Santiniketaner Shekaal. Ed. Srikumar Chattopadhyay (Kolkata: Kishalay Prakashan, 2019), 72.

Haricharan Bandyopadhyay, captured the inaugural days of Brahmaavidyalaya in his memorial account:

সেই সময়ে আশ্রমের বিদ্যালয় – ব্রহ্মবিদ্যালয় বা ব্রহ্মচার্যশ্রম। ১৩০৮ সালের ৭ই পৌষ এই আশ্রমের প্রতিষ্ঠা দিবস। ব্রহ্মবান্ধব উপাধ্যায়, সিন্ধুদেশবাসী রেবাচাঁদ, শিবধন বিদ্যার্ণব, জগদানন্দ রায় – এই চারি জন তখন আশ্রমের অধ্যাপকমন্ডলী। রথীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর, গৌরগোবিন্দ গুপ্ত, প্রেমকুমার গুপ্ত, অশোককুমার গুপ্ত, সুধীরচন্দ্র নাথ – এই পাঁচজন তখন আশ্রমের ছাত্র।⁵

[At that time the ashram school was Brahmaavidyalaya or Brahmacharyashram. 22 December 1901 was the foundation day. Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, Rewachand from Sindh, Shibdhan Bidyarnab, Jagadananda Ray – these four were then the teachers. Rathindranath Tagore, Gaur Gobinda Gupta, Prem Kumar Gupta, Ashok Kumar Gupta, Sudhirchandra Nath – these five were the students.]

The school was to struggle against many obstacles of which finance was certainly a big one. Its growth as slow and full of challenge. Tagore's eldest son Rathindranath, who was also among the very first batch of students at Santiniketan, documents how the very first stage of the creation of the school was the formation of a library housed in a small, one-storied structure at the corner of the garden in the *Santiniketan* compound. It is interesting to note that even before arrangements were made for the recruitment of students and teachers or deciding upon what was to be taught, Tagore found it necessary to create a good library. The content of that library is thus described by Rathindranath:

বাবা তাঁর নিজের যত বইয়ের সংগ্রহ ছিল, কলকাতা থেকে সব আনিয়ে নিলেন এবং তাই দিয়ে ঐ বাড়ির মাঝের বড়ো ঘরটায় লাইব্রেরী স্থাপন করলেন। বাবার বই নিতান্ত কম ছিল না, সাহিত্য ছাড়াও বিজ্ঞান ভ্রমণবৃত্তান্ত প্রভৃতি নানা বিষয়ে বাংলা ইংরেজি ও সংস্কৃত ভাষায় বাছা বাছা প্রচুর বই ছিল। সেইজন্য গোড়া থেকেই বেশ উঁচুদরের ভালো একটি গ্রন্থাগার প্রতিষ্ঠিত হয়েছিল।⁶

⁵ Haricharan Bandyopadhyay, *Rabindranather Katha* (Kolkata: Signet, 2020), 13.

⁶ Rathindranath Tagore. *Pitrismriti* (Calcutta: Visva- Bharati, 1966), 54.

[My father had his entire of book collection fetched from Calcutta and with those books, he established a library in the big central room of the house. My father's books were not meagre in number. Apart from literature, there were numerous selected books in Bengali, English and Sanskrit on topics such as science and travel. Therefore, right from the beginning a somewhat excellent library was established.]

The establishment of this library is also indicative of the kind of teachers Tagore wanted in his school. Since it only admitted boys under the age of ten,⁷ it is unlikely that those little boys were the intended readers of these books. Tagore's library proves that he was looking out for truly learned teachers who would seek to continually enrich themselves through study of such books and he was facilitating the quest for knowledge in those teachers. Tagore's educational enterprise was thus, right from its onset, an attempt to overhaul the entire education system, where he aimed to create the right student to benefit from the guidance of the right teacher.

The first step in the search for the right teacher was to find the right Headmaster to run the school. Tagore invited Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya to take charge of Brahmavidyalaya. This appointment was going to be a short-lived one since Brahmabandhab was unable to assimilate or perhaps accept the educational vision of Tagore. There are many contradictory accounts about Brahmabandhab that can be found in the memorial accounts of the period. Hirendranath Datta describes him as a dedicated teacher and firm administrator who bound every process of the school in a strict routine. He also describes Brahmabandhab as a "hero" to the students.⁸ However, Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, regarded as the first historian of Brahmavidyalaya, differs quite strongly. He describes Brahmabandhab as someone who was not able to assimilate the milieu of Santiniketan, or to realize the greatness of vision that Brahmavidyalaya promised. He saw Brahmabandhab as one who tried to run it on the strength of sheer firmness and iron will, thereby indicating that he was foredoomed not to be a great success at Santiniketan.

ব্রহ্মবান্ধব উপাধ্যায় মহাশয় আশ্রমকে নিঃসন্দেহে সেই বড়ো সৃষ্টির দিক হইতে দেখেন
নাই। তিনি নিজের জোড়ে নিজের মতে নিজের শাসনেই এই ব্রহ্মচর্যাশ্রমকে গড়িয়া
তুলিতে চেষ্টা করিয়াছিলেন – সত্যকে যা পরিমাণে তাহার আপন কাজ করিবার অবসর

⁷ Rabindranath Tagore. *Chithipatre Bidyalaya-Prasanga*. Comp. Gourochandra Saha (Santiniketan: Rabindrabhan, 2000), 13.

⁸ Heerendranath Datta. *Santiniketaner Ek Jug* (Calcutta: Visva- Bharati, 1980), 22.

দেওয়া উচিত, অন্যকে যে পরিমাণে স্বাধীনতা দিলে বিদ্যালয়ের কাজ যথার্থ আন্তরিক সাধনার কাজ হইয়া উঠিতে পারে, তিনি নিজের প্রবল ইচ্ছাবৃত্তি-বশত সে পরিমাণে ধৈর্য অবলম্বন করিতে পারেন নাই।⁹

[Undoubtedly honoured, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya did not view the ashram from the point of view of a great creation. He tried to develop this Brahmacharyashram according to his ideas and based on his strength and discipline – the time that truth needs to do its own work, the freedom that the other person needs to regard the duties of the school as being his own endeavour – he could not exercise that amount of patience owing to the intensity of his own will.]

Rathindranath, too, records that there were growing differences of opinion between his father and Brahmabandhab: “ভারতবর্ষীয় বর্ণাশ্রমধর্মের মাহাত্ম্য সম্বন্ধে বাবার মনোযোগ আকর্ষণ করলেন। একাধারে হিন্দুধর্মে নিষ্ঠা ও প্রকট ধরণের স্বাদেশিকতা তাঁর মধ্যে দেখা দিল। বাবার সঙ্গে ক্রমশ মতবিরোধ বাধতে লাগল। ব্রহ্মবান্ধব শান্তিনিকেতন ছেড়ে কলকাতায় ‘সন্ধ্যা’ কাগজ প্রকাশ করলেন।”¹⁰

[(He) drew my father’s attention towards the greatness of the Indian system of four *varnas*. Devotion towards the Hindu religion and a blatant kind of nationalism simultaneously appeared within him. Gradually there grew differences of opinion between him and my father. Brahmabandhab left Santiniketan and went to Kolkata and started the periodical *Sandhya*.]

This account gives us an insight into the conflicting ideologies of the period and how the school got caught in the crossfire. It also reveals that even though Tagore revered the Vedas, he was not in favour of allowing explicit and crude adherence to Hindu religious ways in the running of his school.

There is another factor that is rumoured to have influenced the departure of Brahmabandhab, allegedly his excessive partiality towards Christian religious values that was, in turn, allegedly disapproved of by Devendranath Tagore who had intended Santiniketan to be a spiritual retreat for the followers of Brahmoism. However, Tagore himself refuted this rumour.¹¹

⁹ Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, 18.

¹⁰ Rathindranath Tagore, 55.

¹¹ Heerendranath Datta, 23.

EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE STUDENTS

One of the earliest accounts of the daily life of the students at Tagore's school can be found in the memorial account of Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, parent to a student belonging to the early days of the school. Chattopadhyay's visit to Santiniketan during the early days of the school allowed him to glean a detailed understanding of its daily routine. The following account sheds light on various aspects of the teaching practice as well as daily life at Brahmacharyashram.

চার-পাঁচ দিন সেখানে থাকিয়া আমি ছাত্রদের দৈনিক কার্যক্রম যাহা দেখিয়াছিলাম, তাহা এইঃ অতি প্রত্যুষে শয্যা ত্যাগ করিয়া হস্তমুখাদি প্রক্ষালনের পর ছাত্রগণকে কুস্তি ও ব্যায়াম করিতে হইত, তাহার পর সূর্যোদয়ের সময় স্নান; স্নানের সময় সন্তরণ-শিক্ষা। স্নানান্তে মন্দিরে গিয়া উপাসনা। উপাসনার পর জলযোগ – মোহনভোগ ও দুগ্ধ। তাহার পর বেলা সাড়ে দশটা পর্যন্ত পড়াশোনা, এগারোটার সময় ভোজন। ভোজনের পর বিশ্রাম, বিশ্রাম অর্থে দিবানিদ্রা বা শয়ন নহে – স্কুলের মধ্যে বসিয়া ক্রীড়া (indoor games), গল্প প্রভৃতি। কয়েক মাস পরে একবার গিয়া দেখিয়াছিলাম যে, একজন মৃৎশিল্পীকে মধ্যাহ্নকালে ছাত্রগণকে মাটির ফল ফুল পাতা ও পুতুল প্রভৃতির নির্মাণ শিক্ষা দিবার জন্য নিযুক্ত করা হইয়াছিল এবং ক্রমে ক্রমে কাঠের কাজ ও বয়নশিল্প শিক্ষা দিবারও ব্যবস্থা হইয়াছিল। ... বেলা চারিটার পর পুনরায় জলযোগ, ... এই জলযোগের পরে আবার কিয়ৎকাল অধ্যয়ন। সন্ধ্যার পূর্বে ছাত্রগণ দৌড়াদৌড়ি করিয়া খেলাধূলা করিত। সন্ধ্যার পর সংগীত, আবৃত্তি, গল্প প্রভৃতি।¹²

[In my four to five days' stay, I observed the daily routine of the students as follows: extremely early at dawn, the students arose and after freshening up, they practised wrestling and exercises. Following this, at sunrise they took their bath. A swimming lesson took place during their bath-time. Post-bath they went to the temple for prayer service. After that, they had their breakfast – semolina pudding and milk. Following this, they study till 10:30 and have their lunch at 11. They take some rest after lunch; however, the rest does not mean a siesta or lying down; they sit within the school, engaged in indoor games, storytelling etc. On my following visit after a few months, I witnessed that a clay potter had been appointed to teach the students to mould fruits, flowers, leaves and dolls etc. during the afternoon. Gradually,

¹² Ibid, 85.

arrangements were also made for classes in woodwork and weaving. ... After four in the afternoon, they had refreshments ... after this they studied for yet some more time. Before evening, the students played actively, running about everywhere. In the evening they had singing, recitation, storytelling etc.]

This early account is bolstered later by greater amount of details in the writing of Bhupendranath Sarkar. Sarkar provides a clear account of the daily function of the school in later days. He writes:

... In the small hours of the night the bell rings; and the students have to rise early with the ringing of the bell. The students in chorus sing round the asrama their own song ... The school day and the college day as well begin. The students are divided into classes according to age. Youngsters have to get up a little later. After ablutions they have to take exercises. Exercise over, they have to bathe. Then they have to engage in prayers. They have to utter Vedic hymns in chorus after prayer. For light refreshments all have to go to the kitchen.

The variety in the tune of bells indicates the nature of the work they have to do. For every work students have to fall in according to the direction of the captain. After breakfast the asramites (inmates of the asrama), young and old, the teacher and the taught – all assemble together and sing a suitable song. Class-work then begins. This consists of five or six periods of work of forty-five minutes' duration. We may note in passing that some of the subjects taught in the school are the following:- Sanskrit, Bengali, English, Mathematics, History, Geography, Elementary Science, Nature Study and Music. Special training is given in Manual Training.

With the ringing of the bell students have to take their noon-day meal. Diet is sometimes vegetarian, sometimes non-vegetarian. Punctuality is enforced at the time of meals.

After two hours of rest and studies classes begin in the afternoon for about three or four periods of work.

Classes over, there is cleansing, then light refreshments follow. With the bell afternoon games begin – foot-ball in summer and the rains and cricket in

winter. For a day in the week students have to take part in the drill and for another day in the cutting of jungles and the like.

After ablutions evening prayer begins. Then the students and the teachers relax themselves by holding meetings, enacting playlets or telling stories. Students then sit to dine. A song sung in chorus alternately by boys and girls follow. Then the asrama is hushed in silence. Everybody goes to bed, except the examinees who may keep comparatively late hours.

From 5 A.M. to 10 P.M. there is continuous activity; but the routine life is not dreary, simply because of the atmosphere of the place. The teachers, be it noted, enter into the lives of the pupils.¹³

It had taken decades for this daily routine to take shape. This chapter proposes to work our way backwards and understand the process by means of which this regular pattern of school life emerged. In the process, it would be possible to understand the reasons why some rules were enacted while others changed or new rules and traditions were put in place, and thus, the significance of those changes.

The growing years of the school were fraught with tension and constant change as the headmaster and consequently, the administration of the school rarely remained static. While the first Headmaster was Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, his departure left a vacuum as the fledgeling school fell into disarray at the loss of its leader. There was a quick succession of headmasters and teachers, among whom were Rewa Chand (teacher of English, deemed not satisfactory both for excessive Christian leanings as well as his character), Subodhchandra Majumdar (Bengali), Haricharan Bandyopadhyay (Sanskrit), Jagadananda Ray (Mathematics and Science), Satishchandra Ray (English), Ajit Kumar Chakravarty and Bidhushekhar Shastri. The position of Headmaster remained vacant for some time, to be filled later by Manoranjan Bandyopadhyay. He was followed by the arrival of Kunjalal Ghosh as the manager of Santiniketan and to whom Tagore's highly significant 1902 letter is addressed. Under the initiative of Bidhushekhar Shastri, Bhupendra Sanyal arrived and was followed by Santosh Mitra sent by Abanindranath Tagore to

¹³ Bhupendranath Sarkar. *Tagore, the Educator* (Calcutta: Academic Publishers, 1974), 15-17.

teach Art. The headmastership later passed on to Mohitchandra Sen after the untimely demise of Satishchandra Ray.

This long list of teachers clearly signifies that even though the number of students was limited, there were numerous highly-learned teachers to guide them in various subjects. Of these teachers, Tagore himself makes particular mention of Satishchandra Ray, an idealist who, in spite of the financial troubles of his family, hastened to join Brahmavidyalaya even though it could not pay him properly. Tagore saw in him an excellent teacher and entrusted Rathindranath and Santosh Majumdar to his tutelage as they were both studying for the Matriculation examination. Tagore's personal commentary on the teachers and particularly on Satishchandra Ray can be found in the third essay of *Asramer Rup o Bikash*, translated under the title "Extract from 'The Form and Development of the Ashram (III)'" as a part of this thesis. A glowing account of Satishchandra Ray has also been presented by Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, who states:

তৃতীয় বৎসরে সতীশচন্দ্র রায় এই আশ্রমে আসিলেন...তিনি অল্পবয়স্ক কলেজের ছাত্র ছিলেন কিন্তু আশ্চর্য বোধশক্তি ও কল্পনাশক্তি লইয়া জন্মগ্রহণ করিয়াছিলেন। সাহিত্যের রসসমুদ্রের মধ্যে তিনি অহোরাত্র ডুবিয়া থাকিতেন। সংস্কৃত ইংরেজি বাংলা ফরাসিস্ ও জার্মান কবি ও রসজ্ঞদের রচনার...আকর্ষণ পান করিয়া আনন্দে এমন ভরপুর হইতে কাহাকেও দেখি নাই। যে তাঁহার নিকটে আসিত তাহাকে তিনি সেই নেশা ধরাইয়া দিতেন।¹⁴

[In the third year, Satishchandra Ray came to the ashram ... he was a young college student but born with extraordinary powers of understanding and imagination. I have never seen anyone who had drunk so deeply in the joy of the compositions of Sanskrit, English, Bengali, French and German poets and writers. Whoever came near him got intoxicated with the same.]

Although nearly all the teachers were stalwarts in their own right, this special mention and respect reveals the depths of Ray's potential. Chakravarty's account depicts a dynamic and imaginative person whose thirst for knowledge was vast and stretched across many languages and his appreciation of what was garnered was true and deep. Furthermore, the last line indicates that he must have had excellent teaching ability as he was able to instil his passion in anyone who came to him. Clearly, these were the qualities that Tagore prized in his ideal teacher, as Tagore himself

¹⁴ Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, 20.

describes him, in the essay mentioned above, as an inspired teacher who instilled joy in his students and declares how his untimely death caused the poet grief all his life.

THE TEACHING

Brahmavidyalaya, at its onset, tried to recapture the ethos, milieu and practices of a Vedic ashram of ancient India. Tagore's address to the students on the inaugural day, titled *Santiniketan Brahmacharyashram* (translated as part of this thesis), bears clear testimony to this intent. Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty's description of the attire and routine of the early students corroborates this fact:

ছাত্রদের নিকট হইতে বেতন গ্রহণ করা হইত না। অধিক বয়সের ছাত্র লওয়া হইবে না, এই নিয়ম গোড়া হইতেই প্রবর্তিত হইল, ছাত্ররা নগ্নপদ হইল, উপানং এবং ছত্র – ধারণ দুইই তাহারা বর্জন করিল। প্রাতঃসন্ধ্যা এবং সায়াংসন্ধ্যায় তাহাদিগকে চেলি পরিয়া উপাসনায় বসিতে হইত, তাহাদিগকে গায়ত্রী মন্ত্র ব্যাখ্যা করিয়া ধ্যানের জন্য দেওয়া হইত। রন্ধন ব্যতিরেকে অন্য সমস্ত কাজ নিজের হাতে করিতে হইত। প্রত্যুষে গাত্রোথান করিয়া বাঁধে তাহারা স্নানার্থ গমন করিত, তার পর শুচিন্মত হইয়া উপাসনান্তে এখনকার ল্যাবরেটরি গৃহে বা মুক্ত প্রাঙ্গণে বেদগান করিত।¹⁵

[No fees were taken from the students. It was ruled from the beginning that students of advanced age would not be admitted. Students were barefoot; they had to give up the use of shoes and umbrellas. At both dawn and dusk, suitably dressed, they sat down to pray and they were instructed to use the Gayatri mantra in meditation after having had the mantra explained to them. Except for cooking, they had to do every other work on their own. Rising early in the morning, they went to the water of the dam to take their baths, after which they proceeded to their prayers. Prayers being complete, they sang Vedic hymns in the open field or at the place where now stands the laboratory.]

This description gives an air of austerity and piety to the whole proceedings that may seem restrictive to modern sensibility. However, other contemporary accounts testify that this austere

¹⁵ Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, 14.

routine was not maintained in this exactitude for a great amount of time. Changes were introduced and students were given a greater variety of activities for both their pleasure and education.

The method of teaching was not extremely rigorous or demanding. Rather, Tagore wanted to simplify the teaching-learning process in order to make it more approachable for the young learners. Tagore demonstrated his desired teaching method through the classes he himself taught and welcomed the other teachers to follow his methods. Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, one of the parents, describes watching Tagore in action as a teacher:

রবীন্দ্রবাবু তিন-চারিটি বালককে ইংরেজি পড়াইতে লাগিলেন। এই অধ্যয়ন ও অধ্যাপনায় নূতন ব্যবস্থা দেখিলাম, প্রায় সকল বিষয়ই মুখে মুখে শিখানো হইতেছিল, অন্যান্য স্কুলের মতো পুস্তকের সহিত ছাত্রদের ঘনিষ্ঠ সম্বন্ধ দেখিলাম না। রবীন্দ্রবাবু এক-একটি বাংলা শব্দের ইংরেজি প্রতিশব্দ বলিয়া দিয়া সেই শব্দ ক্রিয়ার সহিত কীরূপে ব্যবহার করিতে হয়, কয়েকটি বালককে লইয়া শিখাইতে লাগিলেন। দেখিলাম, দশ-বারো মিনিটের মধ্যেই ছাত্রেরা “আমার বই টেবিলের ওপরে আছে”, “তোমার হাত বাক্সের মধ্যে ছিল” প্রভৃতি ছোটো ছোটো বাক্য ইংরেজিতে অনুবাদ করিতে লাগিল।¹⁶

[Rabindra-babu started teaching English to three or four boys. I saw a new system in this teaching and studying. Almost everything was being taught verbally; unlike at other schools, we did not see an intimate relation between books and students. Rabindra-babu proceeded to teach a few boys the English synonyms of Bengali words and how they are to be used with verbs. We saw that within ten to fifteen minutes the students started translating small sentences like “My book is on the table”, “Your hand was in the box”, etc.]

This account is demonstrative of how Tagore wished to make the learning of a new language an approachable process and that the students could relate what they learnt with their mother tongue and thereby comprehend it more easily than if they had to simply memorize the grammatical rules off a book. Interestingly, it also shows how Tagore, through his verbal mode of instruction, harked back to the Vedic practice of *sruti vidya*. That is not to suggest that Tagore

¹⁶ Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay, 77.

championed “heard learning” eschewing all contact with books; it simply signifies that Tagore placed importance on the verbal mode of instruction specifically in the context of young learners.

Tagore emphasized on a number of areas to impart a holistic education to his students. The insistence on wrestling, swimming and other exercises would have been conducive to the development of healthy bodies, while the prayer services helped in spiritual growth. Furthermore, the classes in pottery, woodwork and weaving laid a foundation of vocational training as well as helped the growth of the imaginative and creative abilities of the students. The evening sessions of music, poetry and storytelling nurtured the finer sensibilities within the students that would inspire both their imagination and spirit of creativity. Overall, the scheduling of activities throughout the day ensured that no student idled his time away; rather, he enjoyed the process of being actively engaged.

Chattopadhyay’s account further states how Tagore believed in the process of hands-on education where students would be educated by practical experience.

ছাত্রগণকে অনুমানে পারদর্শী করিবার জন্য কবিবর অতি সুন্দর উপায় অবলম্বন করিয়াছিলেন। একদিন দেখিলাম, ছোটো বড়ো ভাঙা ইঁট আনাহিয়া এক স্থানে রাখা হইয়াছে। ... সন্ধ্যার পূর্বে ছাত্রদের খেলিবার ছুটি হইলে কবিবর ছাত্রদের লইয়া এক স্থানে উপবেশন করিলেন এবং এক জনের পর একজন ছাত্রকে ডাকিয়া, এক-একখানা ইঁটের ওজন কত হইবে, ছাত্রদের আন্দাজ করিতে বলিলেন। ছাত্রগণ যাহা বলিল, তিনি তাহা একজন শিক্ষককে লিখিতে বলিলেন। তার পর একখানির পর একখানি ইঁট তৌলদাঁড়িতে ওজন করিয়া ছাত্রগণকে দেখাইয়া দিলেন যে, তাহারা যে ওজন অনুমান করিয়াছিল তাহা প্রকৃত ওজন হইতে কত তফাৎ। অন্য একদিন দেখিলাম, তিনি একটা বল দূরে ছুঁড়িয়া ফেলিয়া সেটা কত গজ দূরে পড়িল, তাহা ছাত্রগণকে অনুমান করিতে বলিলেন এবং পরে গজের দ্বারা মাপিয়া দেখাইলেন যে, প্রকৃত দূরত্ব হইতে তাহাদের কথিত আনুমানিক দূরত্বের পার্থক্য কীরূপ। এইরূপ ভারের অনুমান, দূরত্বের অনুমান, সময়ের অনুমান সম্বন্ধে ছাত্রগণের একটা ধারণা হইত।¹⁷

[The poet had resorted to a beautiful way of teaching the students how to estimate well. One day I saw that various kinds of bricks – big, small and broken – have

¹⁷ Ibid.

been gathered at a place. ...When the boys were given their evening leave for the playing hour, the poet settled down there with them. Calling the boys one by one, he asked them to guess the weights of individual bricks. He asked a teacher to write down the boys' answers. After that he weighed the bricks on scales and demonstrated the difference between their guesses and the actual weight. Another day I saw that he threw a ball to some distance and asked the students to guess how far it had fallen and then he measured the distance to show the difference between the actual distance and the guesses. This enabled the boys to grasp the idea of estimating weight, distance and time.]

This kind of practical knowledge would certainly have appealed more to the students rather than simply memorizing formulae or mathematical rules from a book. This was an entirely new approach to teaching, radically different from the methods in practice in the colonial school. It can be inferred that Tagore's aim was that his students would internalize what they learnt and assimilation of knowledge would take place in a natural and organic manner, where knowledge would be much more than a superficial burden of data imposed on the brain of a young learner. This innovative approach has been recognized by modern-day scholars as a completely new practice that relied on the exercise of one's sensory organs:

শিক্ষণপ্রণালী নিয়ে আমাদের দেশের আধুনিক ইতিহাসে যত পরীক্ষা নিরীক্ষা হয়ে চলেছে, শান্তিনিকেতনে তার শুরু বলা যেতে পারে। ...কথোপকথনের মাধ্যমে সরাসরি ভাষাশিক্ষার প্রণালী চালু করা হল। বিজ্ঞানশিক্ষায় এল একদিকে নক্ষত্র পরিচয় আর অন্যদিকে ইন্দ্রিয়চর্চার ব্যবহার। ইন্দ্রিয়চর্চার কথা তো বিশেষভাবে বলতে হবে। যদিও খেলা হিসেবে সন্ধ্যাবেলার বিনোদন পর্বে এর চর্চা হত, তবু শিক্ষাপ্রণালী হিসেবেই ইন্দ্রিয়চর্চার ব্যবহারকে আমরা উল্লেখ করবো। ইন্দ্রিয়চর্চা করাতেন রবীন্দ্রনাথ নিজে।¹⁸

[All the experiments regarding methodology of education that are taking place in the modern history of our country have their beginning at Santiniketan. ... The process of direct language teaching was started through the medium of conversation. Science lessons saw the introduction of identifying stars on the one hand and the use of sense organs on the other. The cultivation of the sensory organs

¹⁸ Ghosh & Sarkar, 24-25.

is particularly worthy of mention. Even though the practice was done during the evening amusement hour, we should still mention it as a part of the education process. The cultivation of sense organs was conducted by Rabindranath himself.]

It is clear that Tagore led by example and for every criticism of the practices of the colonial school that finds expression in his essays, Tagore posits an alternate method that would make the process of teaching-learning greatly student-friendly, alongside imparting joy so that school becomes a happy place for the young learners. Not only in the field of science, but in language and literature studies, too, Tagore brought a playful approach where he would start telling a story and stop midway, leaving it to the students to complete the unfinished tale. Sometimes, he would introduce one line of a poem and ask the students to provide the following rhyming line.

The presence of Tagore also gave him the opportunity to familiarize new teachers with his teaching methods, particularly in the case of young children. He wanted to prevent the lessons from intimidating the students, thus the process of teaching had to exercise great patience alongside simplicity in communication. Tagore himself sat in the classes and demonstrated how his techniques could be utilized in order to facilitate the learning process. Sudha Kanta Raychaudhury recollects how Tagore sat in a class with a young teacher and put his methods to practice:

শিক্ষকের পাশেই একটি মোড়ায় বসিলেন রবীন্দ্রনাথ – বসিয়াই সরাসরি নিজেই পড়াইতে আরম্ভ করিলেন; অর্থাৎ ছাত্রদের সঙ্গে গল্প জুড়িয়া দিলেন। নানা রকমের প্রশ্ন করিতে লাগিলেন ছাত্রদের, ছাত্ররাও নানারকমের জবাব দিল। ...জবাবগুলি ঠিক হয় নাই বলিয়া রবীন্দ্রনাথ একটুও বিরক্ত হন নাই। কেননা তিনি সকলের নিকট হইতে সব প্রশ্নের সঠিক উত্তর আশা করেন নাই। উদ্দেশ্য ছিল নানারকম প্রশ্নের দ্বারা ছাত্রদের মনে বিভিন্নমুখী কৌতূহল সৃষ্টি করা।¹⁹

[Rabindranath sat on a bamboo stool by the teacher – as soon as he sat down, he started teaching directly, that is,. chatting with the students. He started asking different kinds of questions and the students gave various answers. ... Rabindranath was not at all annoyed that none of the answers were correct. That is because he did

¹⁹ Ghosh & Sarkar, 42-43.

not expect right answers to every question from everybody. His purpose was not to receive correct answers. Rather, the aim was to create, in the minds of the students, curiosity towards many subjects through those questions.]

This effort by Tagore to awaken the sense of curiosity and the spirit of questioning lies at the heart of his teaching method, so much so that it can be regarded as one of the aims of his educational philosophy. H. B. Mukherjee, in his discussion of Tagore's aims of education, states:

Constant curiosity and alertness of the mind and the emancipation of the intellect from inertia and dead habits, according to Tagore, should constitute a real element in the intellectual make-up of an individual. The desire and the habit of exploring ever-fresh materials from life and nature is a necessary asset. Tagore often regretted that our children mostly lacked that curiosity and freshness of the mind which prove to be the best incentive for acquiring knowledge.²⁰

The monotony of being cooped up within the confines of a four-walled classroom having always been reprehensible to Tagore, the classes of his school were conducted in close proximity to nature. Being out in the open, children grew attuned to the shifts occurring within the world of nature and study of nature itself acquired a deep sense of pleasure that made learning a joyful process. Tagore was a believer in the concept that both thought and expression require the involvement of one's entire body and not the brain alone. By restricting students to a four-walled classroom, their ability to think, understand and express are stifled. An unrestricted ability to move would aid the mind to develop freely. Tagore had cited the instance of his own granddaughter Poupee to explain this point to Leonard Elmhirst much later in 1924:

Poupee tries to speak to me with the whole of her body. Meeting me on the boat, she expressed her delight in the form of a dance of her own design. As she danced her speech was through her whole body. Life is sweet, she wanted to say, life is beautiful, but having yet no language of words, her small mind, stirred to its depths, broke out into a complex movement of dance. Her whole body moved as if to music. ... Children must dance. They must be restless. When they think, the body becomes

²⁰ H. B. Mukherjee. *Education for Fullness* (London: Routledge, 2013), 255.

restless and ripples with a variety of movement that helps to keep their muscles in harmony with the mind.

In children the whole body is expressive. It is in going to school that we take our first false step. There we are required to think sitting. We mustn't move our arms. ... Whenever, as children, we are stirred emotionally or feel receptive to thought, we need an appropriate accompaniment of physical movement.²¹

Amita Sen, daughter of Ksiti Mohan Sen and a latter-day student of Tagore's school, describes the Nature Study class, where students had a free play of their limbs and minds, with rapture:

শৈশবে পিয়র্সন সাহেবের কাছে আমরা পড়েছি প্রকৃতি পাঠ। এই ক্লাসে কোনো বই লাগত না। সারা আশ্রম ঘুরে ঘুরে তিনি ক্লাস নিতেন। গাছ, লতা, ফুল, ফল, প্রজাপতি, পাখি – এই ছিল আমাদের বই। কী ভালই না লাগত আমাদের এই ক্লাসটি। পিয়র্সন সাহেবের কাছেই জানতে পারলাম প্রজাপতির জন্মকাহিনী, এক-এক জাতের প্রজাপতি এক এক জাতের গুটিপোকা থেকে জন্মায়। পাতাভরা গাছের ডাল গুটিপোকা সমেত এনে ঘরে রাখতাম। একটু ফাঁক পেলেই কৌতূহলী চোখে সেই গুটিপোকাকুলিকে দেখতাম। হঠাৎ একদিন আমাদের বিস্ময়ে মুগ্ধ করে সেই গুটিপোকাকার আবরণ ভেদ করে সুন্দর রংবেরঙের প্রজাপতি দুটি ডানা মেলে মুক্ত আকাশে উড়ে চলে যেত।²²

[In our childhood, we had lessons of Nature Study with Pearson Sahib. There were no books needed for this class. He used to roam throughout the ashram during class. Trees, vines, flowers, fruits, butterflies, birds – they were our books. How dearly fond we were of this class! It is from Pearson Sahib that we came to know the birth-story of a butterfly and that different types of butterflies are born from different types of larvae. We used to bring leafy branches bearing cocooned larvae to our rooms. At the slightest opportunity we observed those cocoons with curious eyes.

²¹ Rabindranath Tagore & L.K. Elmhirst. *Rabindranath Tagore: Pioneer in Education* (London: Murray, 1961), 101-103.

²² Amita Sen. *Santiniketane Ashramkanya* (Kolkata: Tagore Research Institute, 1977), 43. Pearson Sahib was W. W. Pearson, an American, who also wrote possibly the first book on the school, *Shantiniketan: The Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

Suddenly one day, striking us amazed, a beautiful and colourful butterfly emerged out of that cocoon and flew on its two wings towards the open sky.]

This description captures the innocent wonder of the child's eyes discovering the mysteries of nature for the first time and the sheer delight leaving a lasting impression on minds, making the knowledge thus gained truly a part of the children. The learning of science too followed a similar process where observation of the natural world was emphasized. The process of observation was not limited to the laboratory. Sen further details: “রাত্রে গৌরপ্রাঙ্গণে কখনো কখনো জগদানন্দবাবুর উৎসাহে আকাশের গ্রহতারা চিনতাম, নাম শিখতাম, উপহার পাওয়া একটি টেলিস্কোপের সাহায্যে।”²³ [The enthusiasm of Jagadananda-babu brought us sometimes to Gaur Prangan at night where we learnt to identify the stars and planets of the sky by their names with the help of a telescope gifted to us.]

Amita Sen did not belong to the first batch of female students of Tagore's school. Yet her experiences can be considered as exemplification of the educational processes followed at the ashram, since no record speaks of any radical change in the teaching methodology through the years that led to the formation of Visva- Bharati University. Here it would be relevant to mention Jogendrakumar Chattopadhyay's account of Jagadish Chandra Bose teaching about life within plants to the students of Brahmavidyalaya: “একবার দেখিয়াছিলাম, জগদ্বিখ্যাত জগদীশচন্দ্র বসু মহাশয় একটা গাছতলায় বসিয়া ছাত্রগণের সহিত বিজ্ঞান সম্বন্ধে গল্প করিতেছেন। উদ্ভিদের গাত্রে আঘাত করিলে যে তাহারাও বেদনা বোধ করে, তাহা আমরা কীরূপে জানিতে পারি, সেই সম্পর্কে তিনি গল্প করিতেছিলেন।”²⁴ [Once I saw the world-renowned Jagadish Chandra Bose sitting under a tree chatting about science with the students. He was talking about how if plants are hurt, they too feel pain and how we get to know that.]

Tagore was a firm believer in the fact that close proximity of children with nature made their minds acquire some of the best lessons possible from the classroom of nature. Brahmavidyalaya, apart from being a school devoid of four-walled classrooms, was also a place where students were encouraged to actively engage with nature and attune themselves to the changes of each season and the variety they brought to the great sensory feast of nature. Kathleen O'Connell comments, “Through his art and the structure of the curriculum, he tried to convey to

²³ Ibid, 45.

²⁴ Chattopadhyay, 86.

the students the subtle resonances which existed between the moods of nature and their own personalities.”²⁵ There are a number of memorial accounts that fondly recollect how the advent of rains at the onset of the monsoon was greeted in the open-air classrooms. Sudha Kanta Raychaudhury, who later served as secretary to Tagore, pens his experience as a teacher and records that while he was new to the job, one day, the sky clouded over signalling the onset of rain. He dismissed his students, telling them to enjoy frolicking out in the rain. However, he grew apprehensive afterwards and started doubting the correctness of his decision. Tagore not being present at the ashram, Raychaudhury wrote a letter informing him about the incident and perhaps anticipating approval from him. The approval was not late in coming. A gladdened Tagore wrote back expressing his joy at the students freely feasting in the banquet of nature:

... পেয়ালাভরে তোমরা প্রকৃতির সুধার ঝরণা থেকে সুধা পান কর। ... সেদিন যে ছেলেদের ক্লাসের বেড়া টপাটপ ডিঙিয়ে দৌড় দিতে দিয়েছিলে, সে খুব ভালো করেছিলো। আনন্দনিকেতনের আনাগোনার রাস্তাটা তাদের খুব করে চেনা হয়ে যাক। মক্কা-মদিনা, কামস্কাটকা, কোচিন, পাটাগোনিয়ার ঠিকানা তারা যখন হয় জেনে নেবে, কিন্তু বিশ্বলক্ষ্মীর স্নেহকোলের ঠিকানাটা যদি এই বয়সে খুঁজে না পায়, তবে যেদিন মস্ত পণ্ডিত হয়ে আমার মতো চোখে চশমা লাগাবে, সেদিন আর কোনো আশা থাকবে না। আর সকল শক্তির চেয়ে খুশি হয়ে ওঠবার শক্তিটা ওদের যেন পুরোপুরি ফুটে উঠতে পারে - ...²⁶

[... Fill your cups and drink deep from the fountain of nature’s nectar. ... You did very well in allowing the boys to briskly jump over fences and run away on that day. May they come to know the road to the palace of joy intimately. They may learn the address of Mecca-Medina, Kamchatka, Cochin, Patagonia in their own sweet time but if they cannot find the road to nature’s loving lap, then once they grow into a great scholar and wear glasses like me, there would be no hope for them. May the power to be joyful grow more fully in them than any other power ...]

²⁵ Kathleen M. O’Connell. *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2012), 188.

²⁶ Sudha Kanta Raychaudhury. “*Santiniketaner Smriti*,” *Santiniketaner Shekal*. Ed. Srikumar Chattopadhyay (Kolkata: Kishalay Publication, 2019), 189.

This letter is almost brimming with joy itself as Tagore sends his blessings for his students to enjoy the moods of nature even at the cost of losing classes. His message is loud and clear that the spontaneous knowledge gained from nature would benefit students more than any book-learning. This highly characteristic letter from Tagore makes the reader wonder why Raychaudhury even felt the need of seeking Tagore's approval, particularly because by 1915 – when his letter was written – it had already grown into a custom of the ashram to dissolve classes as soon as raindrops began their descent. Sudhiranjan Das, a former student, writes in his memorial account,

বর্ষার দিনে কালো মেঘে অম্বর মেদুর হয়ে যখন মুষলধারে বৃষ্টি নামত তখন আমরা পাততাড়ি গুটিয়ে মাস্টারমশায়দের একজনের সঙ্গে বের হয়ে পড়তাম বৃষ্টির ধারায় ভিজে শরীরটা জুড়তে। বৃষ্টির জল তখন মাঠের থেকে খোয়াইয়ে গড়িয়ে পড়ছে আর নানা ছোটো ছোটো ধারায় এগিয়ে গিয়ে পরস্পর মিলে মিশে মোটা ধারা হয়ে ছুটেছে কোপাই নদীর দিকে। আমরাও তার অনুসরণ করে ছুটতাম বর্ষার গান গেয়ে।²⁷

[During the monsoon, when the sky got overcast with dark clouds and it rained fiercely, we would wrap up our books and mats and set out with one of our teachers in order to cool our bodies by drenching in the rain. The rainwater would flow from the fields towards the *khoyai* (the arid land outside) in rivulets and, mingling with each other, these made their way towards the Kopai river. Singing monsoon songs, we too ran following them.]

It is this outburst of spontaneous joy that Tagore referred to in his letter and memorial accounts from the students testify that they did experience those episodes of unadulterated joy, proving the success of Tagore's chosen way.

Tagore's methods were a complete departure from the institutional education system prevalent in India and his desire to overhaul the system was so complete that he felt the need of new textbooks that would serve the need of his new education system. In 1904 he produced a textbook for English, titled *Ingreji Shopan*. It was followed by multiple new volumes in the following years. He also composed thirteen lessons that would introduce a reader to Sanskrit. Later he handed that over to Haricharan Bandyopadhyay and encouraged him to complete writing a

²⁷ Sudhiranjan Das. *Amader Santiniketan* (Calcutta: Visva- Bharati, 1959), 42.

textbook with those lessons. Accordingly, Haricharan Bandyopadhyay finished *Sanskrita Prabesh* in three volumes, published in 1904.

Tagore's school did not follow the traditional system of dividing students into classes in accordance with their age; rather, it grouped students by assessing their abilities and deciding their needs. So, a student with pronounced aptitude in one subject but lagging behind in another did not need to be put in one fixed class that would not do justice to either his strength or his weakness. Pramathanath Bisi explains the system lucidly in his memorial account:

তখনকার দিনে শান্তিনিকেতনে একই ছেলে শিক্ষার তারতম্য অনুসারে এক-এক বিষয় উচ্চতর বা নিম্নতর শ্রেণীতে পড়তে পাইত; ম্যাট্রিকুলেশন ক্লাসকে যদি প্রথম শ্রেণী বলা যায়, তবে দশম শ্রেণী নিম্নতম। কোনো ছেলে বাংলা-ইংরেজীতে হয়তো সপ্তম শ্রেণীতে পড়ে, গণিতে সে অষ্টম শ্রেণীভুক্ত। বছর-শেষে সব বিষয়ে যাহাতে সে ষষ্ঠ শ্রেণীর উপযুক্ত হইতে পারে, সেদিকে কর্তৃপক্ষ দৃষ্টি রাখিতেন।²⁸

[Back then a single student could study in a higher or lower class in accordance with his aptitude. If Matriculation class is regarded as class 1, the lowest class would be class 10. A boy could study in class 7 for English and Bengali and class 8 for Mathematics. The administration paid attention so that he could be suitable for class 6 by the end of the year.]

This complex-sounding system undoubtedly demanded much attention and work on the part of the teachers, alongside providing logistical challenges, but it certainly prioritized the requirement of the student above everything else.

The teachers had to devote a great deal of their time to the education process that went beyond classroom-teaching. There were seven boards, divided according to the subjects taught, with a director for each one of them, and the teachers had to write monthly reports for each individual student recording his progress or the lack of it to the director of the relevant board. In the case of any student lagging behind in any area, additional classes were held much like the remedial classes of the present day. Significantly enough, it was the responsibility of the teacher

²⁸ Pramathanath Bisi. *Rabindranath o Santiniketan* (Kolkata: Visva- Bharati, 1946), 12.

concerned to help any struggling student to progress in class. Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay details the process thus:

শিক্ষা বিষয়ে কয়েকটি বোর্ড ছিল – বাংলা, ইংরেজি, সংস্কৃত, গণিত, বিজ্ঞান, ইতিহাস ও ভূগোল – প্রত্যেক বিষয়ের এক-একজন পরিচালক। ক্লাসের শিক্ষকগণ নিজ নিজ ক্লাসের প্রত্যেক ছাত্র সম্বন্ধে প্রতি মাসের পাঠোন্নতি বা অবনতির কথা, পরীক্ষার ফল প্রভৃতির রিপোর্ট লিখিয়া পরিচালকের নিকট পাঠাইতেন – অথবা বিষয়ানুযায়ী যে মোটা বাঁধানো খাতা থাকিত, তাহাতে লিখিয়া দিতেন। মাসান্তে সভায় আলোচনা হইত। যা ছাত্রের অবনতি দেখা যাইত – তাহাকে ক্লাসের উপযুক্ত করিবার দায়িত্ব শিক্ষকদেরই; তজ্জন্য বিশেষ ক্লাসের প্রয়োজন হইলে করা হইত – অথবা দ্বিপ্রহরে বিশ্রামের পর বিশেষ শিক্ষকের নিকট গিয়া ছাত্রকে কাজ করিতে হইত। ইহা ‘প্রাইভেট টিউশনি’ নহে। কোনো অনগ্রসর ছাত্রকে পড়াইয়া পৃথক টাকা রোজগারের কথা তখন কল্পনার অতীত ছিল। পরযুগে পাঠভবনের অধ্যক্ষরা বিশেষ কোচিং-এর জন্য অভিভাবকদের নিকট হইতে মাসিক টাকা চাহিতে আরম্ভ করেন।²⁹

[There were a few boards of education: Bengali, English, Sanskrit, Mathematics, Science, History and Geography. Each board had a director. Teachers used to send written reports to the directors about the progression or lack of it, examination results etc. of each individual student of their classes; or they would write these down in the thick, bound registers kept for the purpose. A discussion would be held at month-end meetings. The responsibility of bringing up to scratch any student who was lagging behind, rested on the teachers. For that, special classes were arranged if necessary, or after the resting-hour in the afternoon, the student would go to particular teachers to work on their weaknesses. It was not ‘private tuition’. During those times, it was beyond anybody’s imagination that one could earn separate money by teaching a backward student. In later times, principals of the Patha Bhavana started asking monthly payments from guardians for special coaching.]

²⁹ Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay. *Santiniketan-Visvabharati* (Calcutta: Visva- Bharati, 2000), 61.

GROWING PAINS OF BRAHMAVIDYALAYA

Tagore's school, in spite of the rather quiet beginning with only a few students, kept growing as new students joined each year. In its second year it had twenty to twenty-five new students, according to Rathindranath Tagore.³⁰ But the difficulties faced by the growing school were both financial as well as administrative. As already stated, the students were not required to pay any fees. The expenses of the school (administration, infrastructural development, salaries of teachers and all living expenses of the students), were born by Tagore, who at that time received a monthly stipend of Rs. 250 from the estate alongside the royalties from his books. Incidentally, Tagore was under the burden of a loan of Rs. 40,000 incurred as a result of a failed business venture coupled with the loss of business partners. Tagore's wife Mrinalini Devi contributed all her gold ornaments in the hope of tiding over this rough financial time. But that, along with the sale of a house Tagore owned in Puri and a valuable gold watch, was not enough to effect an economic solution. The only aid that the school received during these times was an annual donation of Rs. 100 from the royal family of Tripura.³¹ Thus, from its onset, the school struggled with limited means yet laboured to produce excellent outcomes. Tagore's letters written during these years reveal the extent of financial strain he was under. It is instructive to note the areas where he refused to cut costs and where he sought to economize. Tagore could not sustain for long the ideal of not charging fees from his students; when the school reopened after the summer vacation of 1902, the system of fees was put in place whereby the amount of Rs. 15 was charged per student.³²

Tagore wanted his students to have excellent health in mind and body, thus insisted on physical exercises as has already been mentioned. He was also attentive to the issue of a nutritious diet. In order to provide students with a steady supply of good milk he bought a buffalo and a cow and had them transported to Santiniketan at a cost of Rs. 20 per animal, since even after much search he could not find a suitable cow in Bolpur. Numerous memorial accounts including that of Jogendranath Chattopadhyay refer to milk being a regular part of the simple but nutritious fare

³⁰ Rathindranath Tagore, 55.

³¹ Mukhopadhyay, 38-39.

³² Ibid, 39.

served at the school. A letter written by Tagore to Bhupendranath Sanyal in 1910 mentions that five cows had been bought for supplying milk to the ashram at a cost of Rs. 1000.³³

In a letter written to Mohitchandra Sen in 1902, Tagore expresses his intent to have a good laboratory in his school and that he was sending what at that time must have been a large sum of Rs 800 for the said purpose:

... কেবল ল্যাবরেটোরি যথেষ্ট অসম্পূর্ণ আছে সেইটে যদি আশ্বে আশ্বে ভরিয়ে তুলতে পারেন। রমণীর হাতে ৮০০ টাকা দিয়েছি। সে টাকাটা আসলে ল্যাবরেটোরির টাকা। কিন্তু পাছে আমার অনুপস্থিতি কালে খরচের টানাটানি পড়ে এই জন্য সেটা রমণীর হাতে দিয়েছি।

প্রমথবাবু লিখেছেন তিনি তাঁর বার্ষিক দেয় ১৫০ এবং তাঁর পুত্রের অন্ত্রপ্রাশন উপলক্ষ্যে শুভানুষ্ঠানের দান রমণীর হাতে দেবেন। রমণীকে এই খবরটি দিয়ে রাখবেন।
...³⁴

[... only the laboratory is quite incomplete; if you could gradually fill it up. I have handed Rs. 800 to Ramani. That money is actually intended for the laboratory. But I have handed that money to Ramani should any monetary crisis arise while I am absent.

Pramatha-babu has written that he would hand over to Ramani his annual donation of Rs. 150 and some additional donation on the happy occasion of his son's rice-ceremony. Do inform Ramani about this ...]

It is noteworthy that Tagore mentions another source of regular, even if small, donation in this letter. However, Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar make no mention of this donation in their book on Tagore's school, nor does Tagore's biographer Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay.

In letters written to various other correspondents, Tagore expresses his regret at being unable to pay decent salaries to his teachers and thus his worry about being able to recruit teachers. But the same Tagore strongly emphasizes sparing no expenses to dig a well for regular water supply as Bolpur is a naturally arid region: “কৃপ যথোচিত সুগভীর করিয়া খুঁড়িতে কুণ্ঠিত হইবেন না –

³³ Tagore. *Chithipatre Bidyalaya Prasanga*, 68.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 31.

জল সঁচিবার খরচ বেশি পড়িবে কিন্তু তাহাতে পিছাইলে চলিবে না – বেশি লোক লাগাইয়া শীঘ্র কাজ সারিবার চেষ্টা করিবেন।³⁵ [Do not hesitate to have the well dug suitably deep – it might cost more to drain water out but it would not do to baulk at that – try to appoint more people to finish the work fast.]

Apart from this constant financial tension, the school underwent regular administrative changes owing to the arrival and departure of new faces in charge of running the ashram. An administrative board, including Jagadish Chandra Bose and Mohitchandra Sen, was formed temporarily in order to supervise the working of the school particularly during the absence of Tagore. During the initial years of the school, Tagore's personal life witnessed a number of tragedies in the form of the deaths of his wife Mrinalini Devi, his second daughter Renuka (Rani) and his youngest son Shamindranath (Shami). The requirement of medical treatments for his wife and daughter had taken Tagore away from Santiniketan for long periods and his absence caused him to worry about the proper running of his school. The letters written by him bear testimony to the constant concern for his ashram in spite of his personal crises. In fact, the crucially important 1902 letter to Kunjalal Ghosh was written just a few days before the death of Mrinalini Devi.

Kunjalal Ghosh was appointed as teacher and in-charge of the school and Tagore reposed a good deal of trust on him. But he did not win the trust and approval of other teachers as he was regarded as too much of a disciplinarian who insisted on rules being followed irrespective of the circumstances. As a consequence of growing differences, he left the ashram in 1903. Here, it is important to allude to an issue that posed a complex problem during those early years. Students were supposed to touch the feet of their teachers in respect, according to Hindu tradition, and Brahavidyalaya, functioning under the Vedic model, enforced this rule. But a problem arose when a Brahmin student was required to touch the feet of a non-Brahmin teacher. Tagore's letter had stipulated: “অধ্যাপকদের প্রতি ছাত্রদের নিৰ্বিচারে ভক্তি থাকা চাই। ... ছাত্রগণ অধ্যাপকদিগকে প্রত্যহ প্রণাম করিবো। অধ্যাপকগণ পরস্পরকে নমস্কার করিবেন। পরস্পরের প্রতি শিষ্টাচার ছাত্রদের নিকট যেন আদর্শস্বরূপ বিদ্যমান থাকে।”³⁶ [Students need to be indiscriminately reverent towards their teachers. ... Students should touch the feet of the teachers daily. Teachers should namaskar each other. Maintaining civility towards one another should be an ideal presence for the students.] The

³⁵ Ibid, 53.

³⁶ Ibid, 16.

emergence of this problem caused Tagore to revise his earlier position and he wrote to Manoranjan Bandyopadhyay in December that year:

প্রণাম সম্বন্ধে আপনার মনে যে দ্বিধা উপস্থিত হইয়াছে তাহা উড়াইয়া দিবার নহে। যাহা হিন্দু সমাজ বিরোধী তাহাকে এ বিদ্যালয়ে স্থান দেওয়া চলিবে না। সংহিতায় যেরূপ উপদেশ আছে ছাত্ররা তদনুসারে ব্রাহ্মণ অধ্যাপকদিগকে পাদস্পর্শ পূর্বক প্রণাম ও অন্যান্য অধ্যাপকদিগকে নমস্কার করিবে এই নিয়ম প্রচলিত করাই বিধেয়। সর্বপেক্ষা ভাল হয় যদি কুঞ্জবাবুকে নিয়মিত অধ্যাপনার কার্য হইতে নিষ্কৃতি দেওয়া যায়। তিনি যদি আহালাদিক তত্ত্বাবধানেই বিশেষরূপে নিযুক্ত থাকেন তবে ছাত্রদের সহিত তাঁহার গুরুশিষ্য সম্বন্ধ থাকে না। ব্রাহ্মণের ছাত্রেরা কি অব্রাহ্মণ গুরুর পাদস্পর্শ করিতে পারে না?³⁷

[The hesitation that has arisen in your mind regarding the touching of feet is not one to be dismissed lightly. It would not do to accommodate in the school that which is opposed to Hindu society. As instructed by the Samhita, students should touch the feet of brahmin teachers and namaskar the other teachers. It would be proper to put this rule in place. It would be best if Kunja-babu is relieved from duties of regular teaching. If he is exclusively engaged in the supervision of meals, then there would be no guru-shishya relation of the students with him. Can't other-than-brahmin students touch the feet of a non-brahmin guru?]

This part of the letter offends, if not outrages, every sensibility of equality and liberalism. It is shocking to note that Tagore not only considers such a casteist issue to be worthy of attention, but goes to the extent of declaring that the situation would be best remedied if the non-brahmin Kunjalal Ghosh is relieved from his position as a regular teacher for no other fault but that of not being a brahmin. Tagore does not mention Kunjalal's abilities or inabilities as a teacher but simply suggests relegating him to the kitchen as a straightforward solution; Tagore wants to render him not a guru simply to absolve his brahmin students from the duty of touching their guru's feet. He emphasizes that the school could not entertain anything opposed to Hindu society. His final question deepens the insult even more when he asks if "other-than-brahmin" students can't touch the feet of a non-brahmin guru.

³⁷ Ibid, 24.

The fact that Tagore was not free of caste considerations had already been revealed by the letter to Kunjalal Ghosh where he wrote, “ছাত্ররা যখন খাইতে বসিবে তখন পালা করিয়া একজন ছাত্র পরিবেষণ করিলে ভাল হয়। ব্রাহ্মণ পরিবেষক না হইলে আপত্তিজনক হইতে পারে। অতএব সে সম্বন্ধে বিহিত ব্যবস্থাই কর্তব্য হইবে।”³⁸ [It would be good if students take turns in serving food at mealtimes. There might be objections if the server is not brahmin. So, for that, requisite arrangements should be made.] Here, the reference to caste stings less as it seems that Tagore is considering the possibility of discontent and trying to forestall any trouble from arising. The letter also indicates that casteism was an outcome of the social milieu as the lives of teachers and students were all rooted in social conventions and Tagore could not have uprooted them as per his will. The fact that Tagore did not want to directly attack Hindu social practices is evident in his letter as he writes, “যাঁহারা (ছাত্র বা অধ্যাপক) হিন্দুসমাজের সমস্ত আচার যথাযথ পালন করিতে চান তাঁহাদিগকে কোনপ্রকারে বাধা দেওয়া বা বিদ্রূপ করা এ বিদ্যালয়ের নিয়মবিরুদ্ধ। রন্ধনশালায় বা আহারস্থানে হিন্দুআচারবিরুদ্ধ কোন অনিয়মের দ্বারা কাহাকেও ক্লেশ দেওয়া হইবে না।”³⁹ [Those who (whether student or teacher) wish to follow, in exactitude, the customs of Hindu society would be free to do so and it is against the rules of this school to hinder or ridicule them. No one would be made to suffer by any practice adverse to Hindu customs, be it in the kitchen or at the dining place.] One can infer that a good deal of what can be identified as casteism did not arise from malintent but from the practical obstacles of the time, when to attack the belief system of any individual or community would be an infringement of the idea of toleration. Otherwise, the writer of *Chandalika* could hardly be a firm believer in social inequality.

That Tagore tried to incorporate non-Hindu elements into the life of the ashram gradually with the passage of time is evident from a letter written to Nepal Chandra Ray in 1911, informing him about the prospect of admitting a Muslim student and how the process could be managed without causing rude offence to anyone’s sensibilities:

... মুসলমান ছাত্রটির সঙ্গে একটি চাকর দিতে তাঁহার পিতা রাজি অতএব এমন কি অসুবিধা, ছাত্রদের মধ্যে এবং অধ্যাপকদের মধ্যেও যাহাদের আপত্তি নাই তাঁহারা তাহার সঙ্গে একত্র খাইবেন। শুধু তাই নয় – সেই সকল ছাত্রের সঙ্গেই ঐ বালকটিকে এক ঘরে

³⁸ Ibid, 23.

³⁹ Ibid, 16-17.

রাখিলে সে নিজেকে নিতান্ত যুথভ্রষ্ট বলিয়া অনুভব করিবে না। একটি ছেলে লইয়া পরীক্ষা শুরু করা ভাল অনেকগুলি ছাত্র লইয়া যদি পরিবর্তন আবশ্যিক হয়, সহজ হইবে না। ... এক সঙ্গে হিন্দু মুসলমান কি এক শ্রেণীতে পড়িতে বা একই ক্ষেত্রে খেলা করিতে পারে না?⁴⁰

[... the father of the Muslim student is ready to provide a servant with him. So, what can possibly be the problem? Those who, among students as well as teachers, have no qualms can eat with him. Moreover, this boy should be placed in the same room as those students so that he does not feel left out. It is better to start the experiment with one boy; if a change is required when there are many boys present, it would not be easy. ... Can a Hindu and a Muslim not study in one class or play on one field?]

This letter is in stark contrast to the contentious letter and they are probably testimony to the changing milieu and shift in thought process of the people living in the ashram. After Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Santiniketan in 1915 and his appeal to all for self-sufficiency, a greater change took place in the ashram. Suhritkumar Mukhopadhyay writes,

সে সময়ে আশ্রমে ব্রাহ্মণ শিক্ষক ও ছাত্ররা 'জাত' রক্ষা করে আলাদা পংক্তিতে ব্রাহ্মণ পাচকের রান্না খেতেন, অব্রাহ্মণ কোনো খাদ্য স্পর্শ করত না। যখন স্বাবলম্বন প্রথা শুরু হল তখন রান্নাঘরে যে-সব শিক্ষক ও ছাত্র 'জাত' মানতেন না তাঁরা রান্না করতে লেগে গেলেন। সুতরাং যে-সব ব্রাহ্মণ শিক্ষক ও ছাত্র আলাদা ব্রাহ্মণের রান্না খেতে অভ্যস্ত ছিলেন তাঁদের জন্যে হরিবাবু ও শাস্ত্রীমশাই যে আলাদা বাড়িতে থাকতেন তারই একটা ঘরে রান্না হতে লাগল। খুব সম্ভব সেখানে ব্রাহ্মণ পাচক নিযুক্ত থাকল – ঠিক মনে নেই। শাস্ত্রীমশাই চিরদিন স্বপাক আহারে অভ্যস্ত, তাঁর সম্বন্ধে এই স্বাবলম্বন নীতির কোনো প্রশ্ন ছিল না।⁴¹

[During that time, mindful of their caste, the brahmin teachers and students of the ashram ate at a separate seating with their food prepared by a brahmin cook; no non-brahmin touched the food. When the practice of self-sufficiency started, all the teachers and students who did not believe in caste divisions started to cook. So, for all those brahmin teachers and students who were used to eating separately food

⁴⁰ Ibid, 74-75.

⁴¹ Suhritkumar Mukhopadhyay, "Santiniketane 'Gandhi-Punyah' er Godar Katha," *Santiniketane Shekal*. Ed. Srikumar Chattopadhyay (Kolkata: Kishalay Prakashan, 2019), 140.

cooked by a brahmin, cooking started in a house where Hari-babu (Haricharan Bandyopadhyay) and Shastri-mashai (Bidhushekhhar Shastri) lived. Most probably a brahmin cook remained in appointment – I do not remember accurately. Shastri-mashai was used to always cooking his own food, so there was no question of the law of self-sufficiency being applied to him.]

This reassuring account indicates that Tagore must have changed his staunch position regarding not allowing any element opposed to Hindu society in the ashram. He must have been convinced himself about the need for this change in order for things to have proceeded smoothly in the described way. It indicates a new direction adopted by the ashram where the matter of maintaining caste distinctions was left to personal choice.

To return to the issue of the administrative crisis in Brahmavidyalaya – from which the subject of caste discrimination was a necessary detour – Mohitchandra Sen assumed the responsibility of Brahmavidyalaya in 1903 and strived to organize the administration into a systematic format. His efforts were not only concentrated on teaching the students but were also focused on making them aware of their social responsibility and urging them to fulfil their social obligation. Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty describes life in the ashram under Mohitchandra Sen:

মোহিতবাবু শিক্ষাবিজ্ঞান সম্বন্ধে রাশি রাশি পুস্তক পাঠ করিয়া বিদ্যালয়ের শিক্ষাপ্রণালীর সুব্যবস্থা করিবার কাজে তখন লাগিয়া গিয়াছেন।

...এ বিদ্যালয়ে আসিয়া তাঁহার চিন্তার বিষয় ছিল এই যে, যুরোপ হইতে প্রাপ্ত বিদ্যাকে আমরা আমাদের জ্ঞানলাভের প্রণালীর ভিতর দিয়া কী উপায়ে পাইব। তিনি পন্ডিত ছিলেন বলিয়া পুঁথির শিক্ষার খুব ফলাও আয়োজনের দিকে তাঁহার স্বভাবতঃ ঝোঁক ছিল।⁴²

[Mohit-babu was then fully occupied in properly organizing the process of education in the school, after having read numerous books on the subject of education.

Since his arrival at this school, he contemplated the issue of how we can access the knowledge from Europe through our method of education. Since he was

⁴² Chakrabarty, 25.

himself a scholar, he had a natural inclination towards elaborate arrangements for book-learning.]

Mohitchandra was very sincere and dedicated to his duties in Santiniketan and regarded the mission of the ashram to be of highest importance towards furthering the welfare of the nation as well as safeguarding the traditions and heritage of India. These might have been the reasons why his administration was regarded as having been a highly ambitious process.⁴³ But he was simultaneously admired for his intellect and ability; Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty praises the syllabus framed by him: “তিনি যা পাঠ্যসূচী তৈরি করিয়াছিলেন তাহা যদি আজ থাকিত তবে দেখিতে পাইতেন যা সেরূপভাবে শিক্ষা দিতে গেলে শিক্ষকের কি পরিমাণ বিদ্যাবুদ্ধি আবশ্যিক।”⁴⁴ [Had the syllabus he prepared survived till today, one could have seen how much intellect a teacher needs to possess in order to teach according to that.] High praise of Mohitchandra came from Tagore himself: “... শিক্ষকতা ছিল তাঁর স্বভাবসংগত। অল্পদিনের মধ্যে তাঁর মৃত্যু হয়ে শিক্ষাব্রত অকালে সমাপ্ত হয়ে গেল।”⁴⁵ [Teaching was part of his nature. His early death brought an untimely end to his services to education.]

An ill Mohitchandra left the ashram in 1911 and he died of his illness in a matter of months. His departure left Tagore distraught as he desperately searched for someone suitable to take charge of the ashram. He insisted on Bhupendranath Sanyal to assume the role. When Bhupendranath expressed his uncertainty regarding his suitability for such a responsible position, Tagore assured him of his ability and further stated, “আমার এখন প্রয়োজন একজন খাঁটি মানুষের। বিদ্যা কেনা যায় কিন্তু মানুষ তো কেনা যায় না।”⁴⁶ [Now I need a true person. One can purchase education but a person cannot be purchased.] Under the administration of Bhupendranath, the school gained many new students as well as faculty members. It was in answer to Bhupendranath’s invitation that Bidhushekhari Shastri, a great scholar, joined as a teacher. Bhupendranath nurtured the wish to open an ashram of his own, which he finally did at Bhagalpur after his departure from Santiniketan in 1911.

⁴³ Heerendranath Datta, 43.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 69.

In 1907, Tagore had settled completely in Santiniketan and assumed the responsibility of running the ashram. His presence not only made the administration operate more smoothly, but also gave a strong boost to the morale of the teachers. Tagore continually urged the teachers to cultivate their already rich intellect further. Encouraged by him, Bidhushekhari Shastri undertook learning the Pali language even though very limited books of Pali were available at that time. Tagore also took subscriptions to a number of journals like *Contemporary Review* and *Atlantic Monthly* to help broaden the horizons of everyone in the ashram. Many of the teachers employed were themselves so rich in intellect and such stalwarts of academia that they, individually, can merit independent research studies. However, the range and scope of this thesis not permitting such expansion, I limit myself to mentioning special qualities within some teachers in order to highlight how they affected the character of the ashram as a whole.

Bidhushekhari Shastri arrived at the ashram with the preconception that Brahma Vidyalaya was a complete embodiment of the Vedic ashram of ancient India, and expected the behaviour of the students, the milieu and the socio-cultural practices within the school to be in full accordance with the Vedic ashram. Saiyyid Mujtaba Ali writes, “বিধুশেখর যখন ব্রহ্মবিদ্যালয়ে যোগদান করেন তখন তিনি এই দৃঢ়বিশ্বাস নিয়ে আসেন যে, তিনি বৈদিক যুগের আশ্রমেই প্রবেশ করেছেন। এখানে বেদমন্ত্র পাঠ হয়, ব্রাহ্মণসন্তান মাত্রেই যজ্ঞোপবীতধারী, আমিষ, পাদুকা আশ্রমে নিষিদ্ধ, ব্রহ্মচর্যের বহু ব্রত এখানে পালিত হয় এবং গুরুশিষ্যের সম্পর্ক অতি প্রাচীন ভারতীয় ঐতিহ্যানুযায়ী।”⁴⁷ [When Bidhushekhari joined the ashram, he was convinced that he had entered an ashram of the Vedic period itself. He thought that over here, mantras from the Vedas are chanted, all brahmins wore a sacred thread, non-vegetarian food and shoes were both prohibited in the ashram, many rituals of brahmacharya were performed in the ashram and the relation between guru and his shishya was modelled completely on the ancient Indian heritage.] Bidhushekhari's expectations were certainly high and were not met by the practices of the ashram which, though inspired by the Vedic model, had to bear in mind the modern context. A strong departure was in the matter of the food served; it was never exclusively vegetarian, varying from vegetarian and non-vegetarian depending upon the availability of ingredients. It was never tailored to fit any religious norm.⁴⁸ Moreover, the ashram was also evolving to incorporate new elements that slowly enlarged its range and scope beyond its

⁴⁷ Saiyyid Mujtaba Ali. *Gurudev o Santiniketan* (Kolkata: Mitra o Ghosh, 1981), 79.

⁴⁸ Bisi, 35-36.

Vedic roots. Of its many turning points, two in specific were when the ashram starting taking students other than boys below the age of twelve years, and when Mahatma Gandhi visited in 1913 and inspired the ashramites to be self-sufficient. The introduction of electricity was another change that Bidhushekhkar did not support, as he feared that it would bring luxury to the lives of students who should maintain the rigours of being a brahmachari.¹ Bidhushekhkar himself followed all the regulations applicable to brahmins as per Hindu religion. But his greatest emphasis was on keeping his mind pure and clean. It is perhaps this feature in particular that prevented his character from becoming conservative and enabled a rich strain of open-mindedness to flourish in him. His Muslim student, Saiyyid Mujtaba Ali, describes his old-fashioned, strictly brahmin teacher in these words:

পাঠক ক্ষণতরে ভাববেন না, বিধুশেখর সঙ্কীর্ণচেতা কূপমণ্ডুক ছিলেন। ...ব্যক্তিগত জীবনে খৃষ্টান পাদ্রী এ্যান্ড্রুজ যাঁর অন্তরঙ্গ সখা, ব্রহ্মমন্দিরের আচার্যের আসনে বসে যিনি মুফ্ব কণ্ঠে 'যবন' ইমাম গজ্জালীর 'কিমিয়া সাদৎ' (সৌভাগ্য-স্পর্শমণি) আবৃত্তি করে ব্রহ্মলাভের পন্থা বর্ণনা করছেন, যিনি মৌলানা শওকৎ আলীকে বাহুপাশে আবদ্ধ করে আশ্রম ভোজনাগারে নিয়ে যাচ্ছেন তিনি যদি সঙ্কীর্ণচেতা হন তবে প্রার্থনা করি সর্বভারতবাসী যেন এ রকম সঙ্কীর্ণচেতা হয়।²

[The reader must not think for a minute that Bidhushekhkar was a narrow-minded isolationist. ... If he whose intimate friend in his personal life was the Christian priest Andrews; he who, while conducting the service at the Brahmamandir (the prayer assembly in the ashram), recited in entranced voice the “alien” Imam Ghazali’s ‘*Kimiya e Saadat*’ (philosopher’s stone for good fortune) as a path to attain the divine; he who, embracing Maulana Shaukat Ali, brought him to the dining hall – if he was narrow-minded, then I pray all Indians be narrow-minded like this.]

This is a highly significant description as it helps one understand that teachers like Bidhushekhkar helped create the spirit of the ashram and made it an open-minded, liberal space where global

¹ Ali, 80.

² Ibid.

equality could flourish as it expanded from Brahmavidyalaya to form Visva- Bharati with the motto *Yatra visvam bhavatyekanidam* (Where the whole world meets in a single nest).

Of many remarkable teachers of Brahmavidyalaya, mention must be made of Tejeshchandra Sen, who started teaching at the age of sixteen. He had no formal degree nor did Tagore demand one. In fact, when there came the possibility of forming connections between the University of Calcutta and Tagore's institution, Tejeshchandra wondered if he should try and acquire some degrees. Tagore's response to it was completely true to his educational philosophy: "... শান্তিনিকেতন বিহঙ্গশাবক যখন একদিন পক্ষবিস্তার করে মহানগরীর আকাশের দিকে চাইলে – অর্থাৎ কলকাতা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের সঙ্গে যোগসূত্র স্থাপন করতে চাইলে – তখন তেজেশচন্দ্র নাকি কুণ্ঠিত স্বরে রবীন্দ্রনাথকে বলেছিলেন, 'আমি তাহলে প্রাইভেট পরীক্ষা দিয়ে পাসটাসগুলো করি।' রবীন্দ্রনাথ নাকি হেসে বলেছিলেন, 'ওসব তোমাকে করতে হবে না।'"⁵¹ [When the nestling called Santiniketan one day spread its wings and looked towards the sky of the big city, that is, it wanted to establish connections with the University of Calcutta, Tejeshchandra said in an embarrassed voice to Rabindranath, "Then I should pass the exams as a private candidate." Rabindranath is said to have smilingly replied, "You do not have to do all that."] Since exam-centric education was not the kind Tagore approved, when it came to the teachers of his institution, he valued their knowledge and ability to impart that knowledge to the students, not any degrees that they may or may not have.

ROLE OF FINE ARTS AND PERFORMING ARTS

Kathleen O'Connell alludes to Tagore's concept of the evolution of human beings in order to posit the significance of creativity and self-expression in Tagore's philosophy. She writes:

Tagore's concept of "the surplus in humanity" relates to his concept of evolution. According to his interpretation, a critical stage of evolution was arrived at when homo sapiens developed the capacity to stand upright. ... The greatest gain in the new position was the emancipation of the hands. As the species was able to control its environment, there arose a surplus of energy which was available for self-expression and the creation of art and music. Civilizations were built upon this

⁵¹ Ibid, 100.

surplus. ... At Santiniketan, the values of creativity and cooperative living which he held so highly were promoted.⁵²

It was a natural outcome of this philosophy of Tagore that fine and performing arts occupied such a prominent place in the life of the ashram. The spirit of creativity permeated numerous aspects of daily life at Santiniketan and it would hardly be an exaggeration to state that it became the life-force behind the functioning of the ashram, imbuing the daily activities with vibrancy and life.

Rathindranath's recollection of his student days states that music was a part of the curriculum from the onset of the school. The evenings were dedicated to music, when Tagore took upon himself the responsibility of teaching it to the students. Music lessons gained the strongest force when Dinendranath Tagore settled down at the ashram. Dinendranath, apart from teaching English to the students, assumed the role of the music teacher with greatest success. His command over music was such that Tagore himself described Dinendranath as “আমার সকল গানের ভান্ডারী” or “the keeper of all my songs” and would summon Dinendranath as soon as he composed a song in his head, to teach it to Dinendranath as the poet was prone to forgetting his own tunes. As long as Dinendranath lived, he undertook the principal responsibility of preparing the musical notations of Tagore's songs. Under the tutelage of such a musician, the students of the ashram learnt the joy of singing. Dinendranath was famous for his patience and the faith he had in the ability of his students irrespective of their musical prowess. Heerendranath Datta describes Dinendranath in these words:

রবীন্দ্রসংগীতের শিক্ষক হিসাবে তিনি অক্ষয় কীর্তি রেখে গিয়েছেন। ... এক কালে যাঁরা রবীন্দ্রসংগীতে নাম করেছিলেন তাঁদের প্রায় সকলেরই শিক্ষা দিনেন্দ্রনাথের কাছে। শুধু খ্যাতিনামাদের নিয়েই থাকতেন না, অখ্যাত অক্ষমদের প্রতিও তাঁর ঔদার্যের অন্ত ছিল না। কোনো শিক্ষার্থী সম্পর্কেই নৈরাশ্য বোধ করতেন না, সকলকেই আপ্রাণ চেষ্টায় শেখাবার চেষ্টা করতেন। গান গাইতেও যেমন শ্রান্তি ক্লান্তি ছিল না, গান শেখাতেও তাই।⁵³

[He left behind immortal achievements as a teacher of Rabindrasangit. ... there was a period when all the singers who garnered fame as singers of Rabindrasangit were students of Dinendranath. He focused not only on the famous people; there was no

⁵² O'Connell, 194-193.

⁵³ Datta, 95.

end to his generosity towards the nameless, less-capable people. He was never disappointed with any pupil; rather, he tried his utmost to teach everybody. The way he had no weariness in singing, it was the same when it came to teaching music.]

It is important to note the climate in which Tagore had introduced music and the other performing arts in the curriculum in order to fully appreciate the significance of this addition. Under the influence of feudal and colonial morality, the Bengali *bhadralok* (civilized society) as well as upper class started associating music with amorality and as the forte of the lower classes. Tagore writes,

The Department of Instruction in Bengal had not seen it fit to include music in its curriculum. Therefore the educated class of those days had no reason to feel ashamed of being considered uneducated for not having a taste or proficiency in, or knowledge of music. Rather were they looked down upon as doubtful characters, who through fear of their well-wishers sang in a subdued voice.⁵⁴

Tagore's approach in Santiniketan is posited directly against such narrow interpretations of morality and education. He wanted to provide creative outlets for his students in the form of music, dance, theatre, art, literature, pottery, weaving and so on.

From the Brahmaavidyalaya period onwards, Tagore composed a number of plays suitable for enactment by his students. Many of these plays focused on individual seasons, like *Sharodotsab* on autumn, or *Phalguni* on spring. *Sharodotsab* was based on the celebration that takes place in the season of *sharat*, during which the students of the school would have their Puja vacation. Fittingly enough, the rehearsals went on in the months leading up to the vacation and the play was staged just before the school closed for the holidays. The students would be engaged in numerous aspects of the production, from acting and singing, to constructing the set, making the costumes and managing the backstage duties. It created a wonderful synergy between the reality of children awaiting the upcoming season of celebration and the play, which centred upon the celebration of that season. The words of the play would resonate within the minds of the students and help create

⁵⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, "The Place of Music in Education and Culture," Translated by Indira Devi Choudhuri, *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* (May-October 1947), 43.

the oneness with the world of nature that was Tagore's aim. Pramathanath Bisi gives a vivid description of a song from the rehearsal of *Sharodotsab* having a magical impact on him:

আমি ... স্টেজ বাঁধবার জন্য ডালপালা ভাঙিতে গিয়াছি, দূরে নাট্যঘরে শারদোৎসব-
নাটকের রিহাসাল চলিতেছিল; সেখান হইতে গানের একটি পদ কানে ভাসিয়া আসিলঃ

আজ ধানের ক্ষেতে রৌদ্রছায়ার

লুকোচুরি খেলা-

নীল আকাশে কে ভাসালে

সাদা মেঘের ভেলা।

এই দূরাগত গানের সুর হঠাৎ কী মন্ত্র যেন পড়িয়া দিল! চাহিয়া দেখি, পরিচিত পৃথিবীর
চেহারা যেন বদলাইয়া গিয়াছে, আকাশে বাতাসে জলে স্থলে কে যেন কখন অপরাপের
বাতায়ন খুলিয়া দিয়াছে -- আমি ডাল ভাঙা ভুলিয়া স্বপ্নগ্রস্তের ন্যায় দাঁড়াইয়া রহিলাম।⁵⁵

[I ... had gone to gather branches for the purpose of making the set – the rehearsal
for the play *Sharodotsab* was ongoing in the distant theatre hall. From there, lines
of a song came wafting towards me:

Today sun and shadow play a game of hide and seek

In the fields of paddy,

Who has set afloat the boats of white clouds

On the vast blue sky?

What enchantment did the tune of this song from far away work on me! I looked
around me and found that the appearance of the known world seemed to have
changed and everywhere in land, sky and water, someone had opened the window
to the land of transcendent beauty. Forgetting all about gathering branches, I stood
entranced like one in a dream.]

⁵⁵ Bisi, 29-30.

The revelation that that fragment of song brought to young Pramatha on the day which he never forgot was exactly what Tagore had set out to achieve when he made performing arts a necessary part of his students' life.

Bisi goes on further to describe the impact of the performance of *Phalguni* as well and calls it another process of awakening – the awakening of youth. To him, the songs of Tagore were all golden keys that unlocked magical doors to worlds that he had not even imagined – each leading him to journeys deeper and deeper within him.

The importance given to staging plays at the ashram can easily be inferred from the fact that Tagore had seen it necessary to create a separate venue for regular rehearsals and performances. It has to be borne in kind that the school faced an acute financial crisis and the resources available were accordingly limited. Even under such circumstances, Tagore had built the Natyaghar or theatre hall. Santidev Ghosh records the details of that space in his memoir:

এই গৃহটির পশ্চিমপ্রান্তের এবং পূর্বপ্রান্তের ভিত বা বনিয়াদ ছিল হাতখানেক উঁচু। পশ্চিমদিকের উঁচু ভিতের উপরেই সে যুগের যাবতীয় নাটকের অভিনয় হত, স্টেজ তৈরি করে। Drop Scene বা যবনিকাও ছিল। এই স্টেজে আমার ছোটবেলায় সে যুগের কতকগুলি নাটকের অভিনয়ের কথা আজও মনে পড়ে। দলবলসহ গুরুদেবকে এখানে তাঁর নাটকের অভিনয়ে যেমন দেখেছি, তেমনই গুরুদেবের ওই সময়ের দু'একটি নাটকের বালকদের সঙ্গে বাল্যবয়সেই যুক্ত হবার সুযোগ আমিও পেয়েছিলাম।⁵⁶

[The plinth of this building at both its east and west ends was a yard or so high. All the theatre performances of that era were done on a stage on that plinth at the western side. There was also a drop scene or curtain. I still remember a few performances of plays on this stage during that era of my childhood. The way I had witnessed Gurudev, along with his group, performing there, I too, despite my young age, had the opportunity of participating with other boys in a couple of Gurudev's plays during those times.]

⁵⁶ Santidev Ghosh, *Jibaner Dhrubatara* (Calcutta: Ananda, 1996), 58.

These plays were not only directed by Tagore, but he also acted and sang in most of them, and even danced sometimes. The participation of Tagore elevated the plays greatly on the levels of aesthetics and popularity. The prospect of the enactment of *Sharodotsab* drew such a heavy crowd from Calcutta to Santiniketan that the then-small ashram struggled to accommodate and feed all the guests. The play itself had to be performed on two separate days as the hall could not fit the entire audience in one show. Sita Devi, one of the spectators of the 1911 production of *Sharodotsab*, describes her experience of the play:

বালকদের গান ও নৃত্য এত সুন্দর লাগিয়াছিল যা ত্রিশ বৎসর পরেও উহা যান চোখের সম্মুখে দেখিতে পাই। দুইটি গানের কথা বিশেষ করিয়া মনে পড়ে, ‘আমার নয়ন-ভুলানো এলে’, এবং ‘আমরা বেঁধেছি কাসের গুচ্ছ’। রবীন্দ্রনাথ সন্ন্যাসীর ভূমিকা গ্রহণ করিয়াছিলেন, সুতরাং এবারেও তাঁহাকে তাঁহার সাধারণ বেশের বিশেষ কিছু পরিবর্তন করিতে হয় নাই, শুধু মাথায় একটি গেরুয়া রঙের পাগড়ি বাঁধিয়া আসিয়াছিলেন।⁵⁷

[I liked the dancing and singing of the boys so much that even after thirty years, I can visualize them clearly. I remember two songs in particular – “*Amar nayana-bholano ele*” and “*Amra bendhechhi kasher guchchha*”. Rabindranath appeared in the role of the Sannyasi, so this time as well he did not need to make any notable change to his regular attire; he had only added a saffron turban on his head.]

The ease and simplicity with which music and dance became a part of the daily lives of the ashramites is beautifully demonstrated by an anecdote recorded by Rani Chanda based on what she witnessed on one of her daily walks to her mother’s house in Santiniketan:

একদিন ... যাচ্ছি মা’র বাড়িতে বিকেলের দিকে। ... ডাক্তারবাবুর ছেলেমেয়ে তখন ছোটো ছোটো। তাদের বয়সী পাঁচ-সাত বছরের আরো তিন-চারটি ছেলেমেয়ে – তারা মাঠে ছোটোছুটি করে খেলছিল। এমন সময় ঈশান কোণ হতে কালবৈশাখীর শুকনো হাওয়া ছুটে এল। দেখি মুহূর্তে বালক-বালিকা কয়টি খেলা ফেলে একটা কুল-ঝোপ ঘিরে দু হাত তুলে ছুটে ছুটে নাচতে লাগল আর গাইতে লাগল – ‘পাগলা হাওয়ায় বাদল-দিনে পাগল আমার

⁵⁷ Sita Devi, *Punyasmriti* (Calcutta: Visva- Bharati, 1942), 25.

মন জেগে ওঠে। হাওয়া যত বেগে ছোট্ট তাদের নাচও ততই জমে ওঠে। ... এ নাচ কেউ শিখিয়ে দেয় নি, এ গান কেউ ডাক দিয়ে বসিয়ে শেখায় নি।⁵⁸

[One day ... I was going to my mother's house in the afternoon. ... The children of Doctor-babu were then very young. There were three or four five- to ten-year-old children with them – they were running around in the field. Suddenly came blowing the dry winds of a *kalbaisakhi* (nor'wester in April-May) storm. I saw that the children abandoned their playing in a moment and, surrounding a berry bush, they started dancing energetically and singing – “With the crazy wind on a cloudy day / My crazy heart awakes with joy” (a popular Tagore song). The stronger the wind blew, the more enthusiastically they danced. ... Nobody had taught them to dance like this ... nobody had systematically taught them this song.]

The spontaneous breaking out of the children in a song befitting the occasion and dancing in accompaniment can only be described as unhindered self-expression of minds that have been keenly attuned to the moods of nature. This little anecdote speaks volumes about music and dance forming intrinsic parts of life in the ashram, so much so that little children, with no training in either of the art forms, imbibed that ethos and expressed themselves through an appropriate Tagore song and dance in a fitting manner. Moreover, the children were also highly receptive to the change in the world of nature as testified by their instant response to it. All these are qualities that arise from being in a conducive atmosphere and it is clear that the Santiniketan ashram indeed had that. It remains to be stated that this incident took place certainly many years after the ashram had expanded to form Visva-Bharati, but the passage of time detracts nothing from the significance of this small incident.

The performing arts were a part of the school's education process even when the first batch of its students, including Rathindranath, were being taught. Rathindranath has described his memories of enacting *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a student. This project was undertaken during the term of Mohitchandra Sen in charge. Mohitchandra was himself the teacher of English and while teaching *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he decided that the play should be staged by the students. In spite of the limited abilities of the students, they were excited at the prospect of acting

⁵⁸ Rani Chanda. *Sab Hote Apan* (Calcutta: Visva- Bharati, 1984), 197.

and threw themselves into rehearsals with fervour. The much-feared Mathematics teacher Jagadananda Ray, too, was cast in the play. Inept in acting, Jagadananda caused something of a disaster on stage. But Tagore was undaunted and insisted on casting him in many other plays. So thorough was Tagore's coaching that Jagadananda emerged as quite a successful actor of Tagore's plays and his Laksheshwar in *Sharadotsab* became an ashram legend.⁵⁹

As a practical exercise supplementing Tagore's verbal instruction of the students in constructing English sentences, was born an original play titled *King and Rebel* that he sent to the ashram in 1913 when he was in England. It was staged under the initiative of Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty in April 1913 just before the school closed for summer.⁶⁰

The students were exposed to a steady stream of exceptional singers, dancers and artists who visited the ashram at various points of time right from its early days. Amita Sen has recorded many visits in her memorial account, ranging from the famous Carnatic vina player Sangameshwar, the renowned poet and singer Atulprasad Sen, and the singer Sahana Devi (a member of Tagore's family), to an unnamed student of the world-famous American dancer Isadora Duncan, and Clara Butt, hugely popular contralto singer from England.⁶¹ The experience of watching and hearing them perform must have honed the finer senses and abilities latent in the students themselves.

Bisi's memorial account reveals a wonderfully naïve episode when, sitting in front of the closed curtain on the stage where the students were going to perform the play *Bisarjan*, he was worried how he would watch the play through the curtain.⁶² Obviously he had never watched a proscenium play before nor had he much of an idea about the process of staging plays. There would certainly have been other students like him, as he was hardly an exception. Therefore, most of the students were experiencing theatre, music and dance of such quality for the first time in their lives, so their aesthetic sensibilities were formed in such a way that their standards were naturally high.

⁵⁹ Rathindranath, 68-69.

⁶⁰ The script is available in Sisir Das, ed., *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, 2:749-59. See also its composition and production history, 774-75.

⁶¹ Sen, 49-50.

⁶² Bisi, 32-33.

One of Tagore's remarkable achievements lay in bringing girl students on stage to perform alongside their male counterparts. It was a highly radical step in those times, when societal morality decreed stage performance to be the lot of "fallen" women and prohibited for women or girls from so-called reputed sections of society. The taboo was never a hindrance within the Tagore household in Calcutta, where daughters, sisters, wives, nieces and mothers participated alongside husbands, brothers, brothers-in-law, uncles and nephews on the family stage. . At Santiniketan, which of course was not confined to the family, Tagore opened the range and scope of his productions to include the female members of the ashram. The first step in this direction was taken in 1910 after the wedding of Rathindranath and Protima Devi. The women of the ashram wanted to celebrate with the new bride and the chosen mode of celebration was the enactment of Tagore's all-female play *Lakshmir Pariksha* with the new bride cast as Lakshmi. Performing drama to express their joy was an unconventional choice, to say the least. However, a problem arose on the day of the show when the actresses refused to act in front of an audience including men and boys. This indicates exactly how deep the roots of societal taboo ran; even though belonging to a liberal milieu, the women were unable to shake off the burden of old prohibitions. In order to resolve the problem, Tagore came up with a truly subversive solution; the performance area was curtained off but the subversion lay in the fact that male spectators were sent to sit behind the curtains while women were out in the open – just the opposite of the accepted purdah system where the zenana (women) could watch social functions from behind screens.⁶³

Female students were slowly integrated into the stage productions. They were schooled in music, dance and theatre. Tagore valued their artistic sensibilities highly, which in turn gave confidence to these young girls who were effectively attacking the petrified morality and customs of contemporary society. His respect for the talents of the girls becomes clear in a comment he made about Amita Sen (popularly known as Khuku): ‘...একদিন উদয়নে নৃত্য গানের মহড়া শেষে রবীন্দ্রনাথ ক্ষিতিমোহন এবং নন্দলালকে বলেছিলেন, “আমাদের খুকু অমিতার মধ্যে আছে গানের উৎস”⁶⁴ [“... one day, after the rehearsal of music and dance, Rabindranath told Kshiti Mohan (Sen) and Nandalal (Bose), ‘the source of song is within our Khuku, Amita ...’]. She was often summoned

⁶³ Sen, 24.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 38.

when Tagore composed a new song, and he would teach it to her and entrust it to her safe-keeping for future use.

Music was intimately interwoven in the lives of the people in the ashram. They enjoyed every new season not only through the seasonal plays but also the numerous seasonal songs composed by Tagore. *Basantotsab* or the celebration of spring became one of the most famous festivals of the ashram. It was started in the year 1907 under the initiative of Tagore's short-lived younger son Shami. When Dinendranath finally settled in Santiniketan, a musical soiree was arranged on Dol Purnima (Holi) in 1919. It included presentations of Hindustani classical music and Rabindrasangit.

আশ্রমের মধ্যকার একটি পথ, শাল বীথিতে কাঁকর ঢালা রাস্তার উপর শতরঞ্চি বিছিয়ে দিনেন্দ্রনাথ রবীন্দ্রনাথের বসন্তের গানের আসর বসিয়েছিলেন। ...ভীমরাও সেখানে উত্তর ভারতের হিন্দি ভাষায় বসন্তের গানের যে সুপ্রাচীন ঐতিহ্য আছে, তার দু'-একটি উদাহরণ পেশ করেছিলেন। দিনেন্দ্রনাথ রবীন্দ্রসংগীত গেয়েছিলেন, ধীরেন্দ্রকৃষ্ণ বেহালা ও এস্রাজ বাজিয়ে সংগত করেছিলেন।⁶⁵

[There was a path lined with sal trees through the ashram; on its red pebble-strewn surface, Dinendranath spread carpets and arranged for a musical gathering with Tagore's springtime songs. ... Bhimrao (Bhimrao Hasurkar Sastri) presented a few examples of the ancient tradition of spring songs in the Hindi language of north India. Dinendranath sang Rabindrasangit. Dhirendra Krishna (Dhirendra Krishna Dev Barman) accompanied them on violin and *esraj* (Tagore's favourite instrument).]

Tagore had an eminent group of musicians at the ashram who taught music to the students. There were Nakuleshwar Goswami and Loknath Goswami from the Bishnupuri gharana of Hindustani classical. Bhimrao Hasurkar Sastri was a percussion maestro of the Gwalior gharana. For dance, Tagore invited Kumar Buddhimanta Singh from Manipur to train students in Manipuri classical dance. He was accompanied by a mridangam player, from whom pupils had the opportunity of learning the mridangam.

⁶⁵ Ghosh & Sarkar, 113.

Painting was another chosen avenue of creativity and self-expression at the ashram. It was a compulsory subject in Brahmavidyalaya, as remembered by Amita Sen. Nagendranath Aich had joined the school as an art teacher in 1904, when the boys had started learning art. Of his pupils, Mukul De was particularly promising. When Surendranath Kar joined the ashram in 1917, art teaching was taken to a new level as he taught students much more than the drawing of still life that they were used to. He taught landscape painting with the technique of wash that was completely new to them. Under Kar's initiative, the students started painting backdrops for the stage productions, too.

Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar have analysed the connection between the Kala Bhavana or art college that was formed later at Santiniketan and the Patha Bhavana or the latter-day school of the ashram. Their observation, particularly the last three lines, holds equally true for Brahmavidyalaya and the role of creative arts:

উচ্চশিক্ষার একটি বিভাগের সঙ্গে স্কুলের ছেলেমেয়েদের এই প্রত্যক্ষ ও পরোক্ষ যোগাযোগের তাৎপর্য অসীম। কলাভবন ও পাঠভবনের এই নিরন্তর আদান-প্রদান কীভাবে এই যোগসূত্র সম্ভব তা করে দেখিয়েছে। ... ছাত্ররা নতুন নতুন আঙ্গিক শিখেছে। তাদের মনের জগৎ প্রসারিত হয়েছে। তাদের শিল্পবোধ, রুচিবোধ, সৌন্দর্যবোধ প্রসারিত হয়েছে।⁶⁶

[There is a great significance of this direct and indirect connection between a department of higher education and schoolchildren. The constant interaction between Kala Bhavana and Patha Bhavana has demonstrated how this connection is possible. ... Students have learnt new styles and forms. The arena of their minds has been broadened. It developed within them their aesthetic and cultural sensibilities as well as the sense of the beautiful.]

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Tagore's 1902 letter, which can effectively be regarded as the constitution of the ashram, foregrounded the spiritual aspect of education and expresses his admiration for the education

⁶⁶ Ibid, 122.

system of ancient India, particularly because education had not been commodified at that time. For Tagore, the true connection between teacher and students is a spiritual one, and Tagore lamented the loss of that spiritual aspect from the education process of his day. He wanted to forge that spiritual bond once again in Brahmaavidyalaya. Thus, his letter lays deep emphasis on the qualities of devotion, respect, tolerance and selflessness. It was probably also the reason why he insisted on his students learning to selflessly serve humanity, animals and the world of nature.

Tagore repeatedly emphasizes the need to exercise great patience as the development of spiritual sensibilities is a time-consuming process. His letter explains that his ashram aims to teach through the process of brahmacharya and brahmacharya itself is a spiritual process by means of which one establishes eternal connection with Brahma. Contextualized thus, the process of education in the ashram could never be commercial. Tagore writes,

... ব্রহ্মচর্যব্রত ... ধর্মব্রত। পৃথিবীতে অনেক জিনিষই কেনাবেচার সামগ্রী বটে কিন্তু ধর্ম পণ্যদ্রব্য নহে। ইহা এক পক্ষে মঙ্গল ইচ্ছার সহিত দান ও অপর পক্ষে বিনীত ভক্তির সহিত গ্রহণ করিতে হয়। ... প্রাচীন ভারতে ... তাঁহারা শিক্ষার সঙ্গে এমন একটি জিনিষ দিতেন যাহা গুরুশিষ্যের আধ্যাত্মিক সম্বন্ধ ব্যতীত দানপ্রতিগ্রহ হইতেই পারে না।

ছাত্রদিগের সহিত এইরূপ পারমার্থিক সম্বন্ধ স্থাপনই শান্তিনিকেতনব্রহ্মবিদ্যালয়ের মুখ্য উদ্দেশ্য।⁶⁷

[... brahmacharya ... is a vow of dharma. Many things of this world are commodities to be bought and sold but dharma is not a commodity. It has to be given by one side with innate goodwill and received by the other with submissive reverence. ... in ancient India ... what they delivered with their teaching could not be repaid without the establishment of a spiritual connection between the student and the teacher.

To create such spiritual ties with the students is the primary goal of Santiniketan Brahmaavidyalaya.]

⁶⁷ Tagore. *Chithipatre*, 15.

Not only in this letter, but even during his address to the students of Brahmavidyalaya on the inaugural day, Tagore introduced them to this new path with the following words:

এক কথায় আজ থেকে তোমাদের ব্রহ্মব্রত। এক ব্রহ্ম তোমাদের অন্তরে বাহিরে সর্বদা সকল স্থানেই আছেন। তাঁর কাছ থেকে কিছুই লুকোবার জো নেই। তিনি তোমাদের মনের মধ্যে স্তব্ধ হয়ে দেখছেন। যখন যেখানে থাক, শয়ন কর, উপবেশন কর, তাঁর মধ্যেই আছ, তাঁর মধ্যেই সঞ্চরণ করছ। তোমার সর্বাস্থে তাঁর স্পর্শ রয়েছে—তোমার সমস্ত ভাবনা তাঁরই গোচরে রয়েছে। তিনিই তোমাদের একমাত্র ভয়, তিনিই তোমাদের একমাত্র অভয়।

প্রত্যহ অন্তত একবার তাঁকে চিন্তা করবে। তাঁকে চিন্তা করবার মন্ত্র আমাদের বেদে আছে। এই মন্ত্র আমাদের ঋষিরা দ্বিজেরা প্রত্যহ উচ্চারণ করে জগদীশ্বরের সম্মুখে দণ্ডায়মান হতেন। সেই মন্ত্র, হে সৌম্য, তুমিও আমার সঙ্গেসঙ্গে একবার উচ্চারণ করো:

ওঁ ভূৰ্ভুবঃ স্বঃ তৎসবিতুর্বরেন্যং ভর্গো দেবস্য ধীমহি ধियो যো নঃ প্রচোদয়াৎ।⁶⁸

[To put it briefly, from today onwards you are vowed to the path of Brahma. The one Brahma is omnipresent both within and without you. You cannot hide anything from him. He is silently watching you from within yourselves. Wherever you are, lying down or sitting, you are within him and moving within him. You bear his touch in your entire body – he is privy to all you think. He is the only one to fear and he is the only one who destroys fear.

Every day think about him at least once. Our Vedas contain the mantra to contemplate him. This mantra was uttered daily by our sages as they stood before the God of the Universe. O tranquil one, join me in uttering that mantra:

oṃ bhūrbhuvāḥ svaḥ tatsaviturvareṇyaṃ bhargo devasya dhīmahi dhiyo yo naḥ pracodayāt]

This mantra, known as the Gayatri mantra, was explained by Tagore in his letter so that it could be repeated to the students for their understanding. Tagore wanted the students to sit in meditation twice a day – at dawn and dusk – and recommended that they meditate on the Gayatri mantra. He explained the significance of the mantra so that the students do not simply chant some words without understanding their meaning.

⁶⁸ Rabindranath Tagore. *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1989), 301.

It was Tagore's intent that education should set the mind free from all external and superficial paraphernalia. Such an inner liberation is true freedom and the education in the ashram was oriented around this approach. But this liberation did not imply a disconnect with one's fellow beings. Rather, liberation of this kind would nurture qualities of empathy, kindness and tolerance that would in turn help an individual in realizing his innate relationship with the world as a whole. This process of realization is termed by H. B. Mukherjee as cosmic consciousness. He explains this aspect of Tagore's educational philosophy thus:

... this spiritual awareness of the kinship of the self with others outside the ego is not meant to be limited even to the human sphere only. Deriving inspiration from the *Upanishads*, Tagore pleaded that it should embrace Nature. His ardent advocacy of education in Nature since childhood is founded on this philosophy. *Cosmic consciousness (Viśva-bodh)* of the oneness of all animate and inanimate objects is an indispensable element of education.⁶⁹

According to O'Connell, the Gayatri mantra served as a vehicle through which the students could realize and understand the nature of this relationship between each soul and the greater world. She writes,

The use of the Gayatri Mantra continued since it was felt to be a useful vehicle for helping the students realize the connection between themselves and others. Another mantra was also employed to help the students identify with nature.

The God who is in fire, who is in water, who interpenetrates the whole world, who is in herbs, who is in trees, to that God I bow down again and again.⁷⁰

This mantra, quoted by O'Connell in translation, is the one Tagore regarded as being the simplest mantra through which the boys could create within themselves a sense of Brahma.

In the ashram, Wednesdays were dedicated to the special prayer service that took place at the *Upasana Griha*, popularly known as Mandir. Whenever Tagore was present in the ashram, he led the service himself. He would be the first to arrive at the Mandir, where he started ringing the bell in order to call the ashramites to the service. It involved reading of Vedic mantras, a sermon

⁶⁹ Mukherjee, 262.

⁷⁰ O'Connell, 207.

and finally singing that completed the process of praying. Bisi gives a highly significant account of the prayer services, which he describes as having no affinity to any organized religion: “অনেকের ধারণা আছে যে, শান্তিনিকেতনে ব্রাহ্মপদ্ধতিতে উপাসনা হইয়া থাকে। এখানকার উপাসনাপদ্ধতি সম্পূর্ণভাবে অসাম্প্রদায়িক; ধর্মের সর্বজনগ্রাহ্য মূলতত্ত্বই বিবৃত হইয়া থাকে মাত্র। ভারতীয় প্রাচীন ঋষিগণের উপদেশও যেমন প্রদত্ত হয় তেমনি খৃষ্ট, বুদ্ধ, মহম্মদ, নানক, চৈতন্য, কবীর প্রভৃতি ধর্মগুরুদের কথাও বর্ণিত হয়।”⁷¹ [Many people think that in Santiniketan, the service is conducted according to Brahmo (Samaj) procedure. The procedure of services here is completely noncommunal; only the generally accepted core values of religions are described. Just as the wisdom of ancient Indian sages is expressed, so are delivered the words of religious gurus like Christ, Buddha, Muhammad, Nanak, Chaitanya, Kabir and others.]

SELF-GOVERNANCE

Having equipped his students with what Tagore considered as core values of humanism, he trusted them to govern their own conduct as well as misconduct. The system of self-governance of the students was not present at the onset. In those early days, students’ misdeeds were left to be judged by teachers. The amount of misconduct and rule-breaking that happened at the ashram could be considered to be high as Santiniketan was cast in the contemporary popular imagination as a reformatory for incurably delinquent boys. Accordingly, masters of miscreancy were sent off to the ashram. This curious fact has been endorsed by numerous accounts coming from different sources. Rathindranath recollects,

অনেক বছর পর্যন্ত সাধারণের ধারণা ছিল শান্তিনিকেতনের বিদ্যালয় যান একটা রিফর্মেটরি ইস্কুল। অভিভাবকরা সেখানে দুরন্ত ছেলেদেরই পাঠাতেন। কিন্তু তখন আশ্রমের এমন আবহাওয়া ছিল, অল্পদিনের মধ্যেই নিতান্ত বেয়াড়া ছেলেরাও সগজে টিট হয়ে আসত। নতুন কেউ ভর্তি হলেই সকলে মিলে চেষ্টা করা যেত তাকে আশ্রমের উপযোগী করে গড়ে তোলার

⁷¹ Bisi, 42.

জন্য। সহজে যাদের বাগ মানাতে পারা যেত না তাদের জন্য আমাদের প্রায়ই অভিনব উপায় আবিষ্কার করতে হত⁷²

[For many years, people generally thought of the school at Santiniketan as a reformatory school. Guardians sent only truant boys over there. But the atmosphere of the ashram back then was such that even seriously deviant boys started to mend their ways. Whenever any new admission occurred, all of us together tried to mould him according to the ways of the ashram. For the ones who were not easily malleable, we had to frequently invent newer methods.]

By the use of the pronoun “we”, Rathindranath is referring to himself and his fellow students, implying that they took it upon themselves to ensure that their new classmates fitted in and behaved acceptably.

Sudhiranjan Das records what his family had said while sending him off to Santiniketan: “কলকাতার কটন স্কুলের নাম শুনেছ তো? সেখানে মেরে ছেলেদের তুলোধুনো করে দেয়। সেখানেও তোমাকে সানাবে না বলে তোমাকে রবি ঠাকুরের ইস্কুলে পাঠানো হচ্ছে – রবি ঠাকুর তোমাকে ঠেঙিয়ে সোজা বানিয়ে দেবেন।”⁷³ [You have heard about the Cotton School in Calcutta, haven’t you? There they beat boys to a pulp. Even they would not sharpen their knives on you, so you are being sent to Rabi Thakur’s school – Rabi Thakur would thrash you straight.]

However, this threat of being beaten to submission was quite far from the truth. While the boys were indeed punished and sometimes teachers happened to strike them, that was not the regular practice of the school. In fact, Jagadananda Ray, after having slapped a boy, was so remorseful that he consoled the miscreant with a handful of biscuits. Envious of his good fortune, the rest of the boys immediately set off to anger Jagadananda Ray, get beaten and fed biscuits in turn.⁷⁴ Unfortunately for them, Jagadananda was in no mood to get angry.

Heerendranath Datta writes how Bhupendranath Sanyal turned a boy around simply by loving and caring for him:

⁷² Rathindranath, 60.

⁷³ Sudhiranjan Das. *Amader Santiniketan* (Calcutta: Visva- Bharati, 1959), 15.

⁷⁴ Bisi, 26-27.

... একটি অতিমাত্রায় দুরন্ত ছেলে সকলকেই ব্যাতিব্যস্ত করে তুলেছিল, তাকে সামলানোই দায় হয়ে উঠেছিল। তাকে এখানে রেখে কোনো লাভ হবে না, কাজেই বাড়িতে বাপ-মায়ের কাছে ফেরত পাঠানোর কথা ভাবা হচ্ছিল। ভূপেনবাবু বললেন – ছেলেটিকে কিছুদিনের জন্যে তাঁর হাতে ছেড়ে দেওয়া হোক। তাই করা হল। শুধু স্নেহ-ভালোবাসার দ্বারা তিনি সেই দুরন্ত ছেলেকে সম্পূর্ণ বশে এনেছিলেন। দু-তিন মাসের মধ্যেই তার স্বভাবের আশ্চর্য পরিবর্তন হল।⁷⁵

[... an extremely mischievous boy had troubled everyone and no one could control him. Since no good was coming of retaining him at school, it was being thought of to return him home to his parents. Bhupen-babu said – let the boy be left entirely to him for a few days. So it was done. Through just affection and care he had brought that truant boy entirely under control. There was an extraordinary change in the boy's character within a period of two or three months.]

These events are indicative of how wrongdoing was dealt with by the teachers Tagore's eldest brother,, Dwijendranath Tagore, had also settled in Santiniketan. He played no part either in the teaching or the administration of the school, but had once witnessed, during his morning walk, Jagadananda Ray boxing the ears of a student. Upon his return he sent a note to Jagadananda, bearing the rhyme “শোনো হে জগদানন্দ দাদা,/ গাধারে পিটিলে হয় না অশ্ব/ অশ্বে পিটিলে হয় যে গাধা ...”⁷⁶ [Hear me, brother Jagadananda/ Beating turns not an ass into a horse/ But a beaten horse can turn into an ass ...’]. Through his rhyme, Dwijendranath communicated his concern that physical punishment can destroy potential within even a clever child.

The question thus arises as to how discipline was maintained within the ashram and how lapses were dealt with. Tagore reposed a great deal of trust on his students and, in the face of considerable opposition, handed over the responsibility of governing them unto the students themselves, thereby initiating their self-govern. H. B. Mukherjee documents the process:

Self-government was introduced among the students in the teeth of considerable criticism and opposition from his colleagues and countrymen. The “Aśram Sammilanī” (School Association) constituted the student parliament having all the

⁷⁵ Datta, 67.

⁷⁶ Ali, 121.

students as its members. It elected an executive body with a General Secretary. The elected monitors, called “captains,” were the executive authorities in various allotted spheres. They wielded great power and their authority was implicitly respected. There was a “Vichārasabhā” (Council of Judgement) that took up cases of indiscipline and awarded punishments.⁷⁷

The introduction of self-governance was a controversial decision since most of the teachers were, as Bisi describes mildly, “পুরাতন ছাঁচের মানুষ” or “old-fashioned”, and certainly not products of Tagore’s educational philosophy.⁷⁸ Despite the opposition, self-governance of the students proved to be a success; the process of judgement, in the case of any indiscipline or serious offence, was a democratic one where the decision was taken through voting, and there were no incidents of major miscarriage of justice.

Through governing themselves successfully, students proved themselves worthy of the trust placed in them by Tagore. This ability to govern themselves is perhaps latent in students, because one is reminded of how Rathindranath spoke about the students taking upon themselves the task of acclimatizing a newcomer to the atmosphere of the ashram and inventing newer ways of getting around a particularly resistant boy.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

It was Tagore’s vision that students of his ashram would learn to fulfil their social obligations from a young age. He wanted the educational system to make a student responsible and self-sufficient. Accordingly, the students were responsible for every work at the ashram with the exception of cooking. They had to sweep floors, wash their own clothes, wash their own plates and dishes and keep the rooms they lived in tidy. Later on, when female students joined the school, they assumed the further responsibility of stitching and mending any torn clothes or bedsheets. To each girl aged twelve or thirteen, the responsibility of a younger child was bestowed, and they had to take care of the mending of any article of clothing belonging to their individually assigned children.

⁷⁷ Mukherjee, 63.

⁷⁸ Bisi, 52.

In addition to these practices, Tagore wanted his students to be socially aware and learn to serve the people in society. When Tagore's educational experiment is placed in the context of India's freedom struggle, one has to note that the early years of the school coincided with the Anti-Partition movement of 1905, when Tagore himself was an active member of the Indian National Congress and had taken to the streets repeatedly to protest peacefully against the Partition of Bengal. A number of constructive programmes of social welfare were undertaken by him, like the Swadeshi Mela and collection of relief funds for the victims of a major earthquake. It was only natural that he wanted to imbue within his students the spirit of social service.

Brahmavidyalaya formed a relation of friendship and service with the nearby villages. Students from the ashram would visit the villages regularly and build intimate awareness about the problems faced by rural India. So, the ashram was not a disconnected island of idealism where the dwellers had no awareness of the real world. The process of involving the students actively in the cause of serving the needs of society started primarily during the administration of Mohitchandra Sen.

Bhupendranath Sen started a “দরিদ্র ভান্ডার” or collection of relief for the poor at the ashram. It included monthly contribution by the teachers and the guests of the ashram alongside Tagore's primary financial support. Every day, two *seers* of rice went into the collection from the kitchen. Apart from this, a collection box was kept at the Mandir, where people could donate rice, clothes, blankets and so on. The collection was distributed later at the villages. A part of the collection was retained for the aid of any poor student of the ashram. Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty has given a detailed account of the activities undertaken as part of social service:

ছেলেরা বাসন মাজিত, রান্না-ঘরের কাজ করিত, দরিদ্রসেবা করিত, ভুবনডাঙা গ্রামের শিক্ষা ও চিকিৎসার ভার গ্রহণ করিয়াছিল। প্রত্যহ বৈকালে কয়েকটি স্বেচ্ছাৱতী বালক ভুবনডাঙা গ্রামে গিয়া সেখানকার ছেলেদের পড়াইত। আর কয়েকজন তাহাদের ঘরে বসিয়া রোগীদের হোমিওপ্যাথি ঔষধ বিতরণ করিত। সন্ধ্যায় অধ্যাপকগণ পালাক্রমে গ্রামবাসীদের একত্র করিয়া মহাভারত রামায়ণ ও ইতিহাসের কথা শুনাইতেন।⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Chakravarty, 39.

[The boys washed utensils, worked in the kitchen, served the poor and took up the responsibility of healthcare and teaching in the village of Bhubandanga. Every evening a few boys who had volunteered, went to the village to teach the boys there. Some went to their rooms, sat down over there and distributed homeopathic medicines for the sick. In the evenings, the teachers took turns to tell stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to the villagers.]

Tagore encouraged these actions with a great deal of enthusiasm. His letters written from Calcutta during this period are full of references to these activities. In fact, even in the 1902 letter, he states that he would send homeopathic medicines from Calcutta for distribution among the sick even though the students were not yet in the practice of visiting the village: “শান্তিনিকেতনে ঔষধ লইতে রোগী আসিলে তাহাদিগকে হোমিওপ্যাথি ঔষধ দিবেন। যে যে ঔষধের প্রয়োজন হইবে আমাকে তালিকা করিয়া দিলে আমি আনাইয়া দিব।”⁸⁰ [If patients come to Santiniketan for medicines, give them homeopathic medicines. If you give me a list of the required medicines, I will arrange for their procurement.]

This practice of rendering service to society was internalized so deeply by the students that once, Reverend Krishna Chandra Mitra met a few students of Santiniketan on a train journey and observed that they were spontaneously offering their help to women and elderly people travelling by that train. He was so favourably impressed by this readiness to help that he wrote to Tagore expressing his admiration.⁸¹

Tagore firmly believed that education would not be complete without realizing the social responsibility that the students had. Sriniketan, the major vehicle of Tagore’s rural reconstruction project established at a later date, was a product of this vision. Even before Sriniketan was founded, efforts were being made to facilitate agriculture in the geographically challenging conditions of the Birbhum district where the ashram was located:

In 1912, a site at Surul was acquired from the Zamindars of Raipur, and in 1914, the research laboratory was shifted there from Silaidah and an agricultural farm established under Rathindranath Tagore and Nagendranath Ganguly. But the dense

⁸⁰ Tagore. *Chithipatre*, 19.

⁸¹ Ghosh & Sarkar, 48.

jungles, the malarious climate, and the general dilapidated condition of the buildings made progress impossible.⁸²

It is noteworthy that Rathindranath had just graduated in agricultural science from the University of Illinois according to the wishes of his father, who had sent him there with the hope that advanced knowledge about farming technology would be particularly useful in the backward agricultural economy of India.

THE FEMALE SECTION

The school's female section deserves separate discussion on account of certain problematic aspects of female education as conceptualized by Tagore. The difficult relation between Tagore and female education has already been highlighted in Chapter III. The biggest point of contention is that he refused to accept that women and men had the right to the same education, "same" being the operative word. He insisted on gendering the education received by male and female students, thereby conditioning his male students into normative manhood and female students into normative womanhood. Therefore, even though Tagore was indeed progressive in starting the practice of coeducation at Santiniketan, training his female students in performing arts and encouraging them to perform in public, the problem lies in the fact that he could not envision an education system where students are regarded simply as students irrespective of their sex:

মেয়েদের মানুষ হইতে শিখাইবার জন্য বিশুদ্ধ জ্ঞানের শিক্ষা চাই, কিন্তু তার উপরে মেয়েদের মেয়ে হইতে শিখাইবার জন্য যা ব্যবহারিক শিক্ষা তার একটা বিশেষত্ব আছে, এ কথা মানিতে দোষ কী?

মেয়েদের শরীরের এবং মনের প্রকৃতি পুরুষের হইতে স্বতন্ত্র বলিয়াই তাহাদের ব্যবহারের ক্ষেত্র স্বভাবতই স্বতন্ত্র হইয়াছে। আজকাল বিদ্রোহের ঝাঁকে এক দল মেয়ে এই গোড়াকার কথাটাকেই অস্বীকার করিতেছেন। তাঁরা বলেন, মেয়েদের ব্যবহারের ক্ষেত্র পুরুষের সঙ্গে একেবারে সমান।⁸³

⁸² Mukherjee, 313.

⁸³ Tagore. *Rabindrarachanabali*, vol. 16 (Calcutta: Visva- Bharati, 2000), 286.

[In order to educate women to become human, the education of pure knowledge is needed, but where is the harm in accepting on top of that the special need of behavioural education to educate women to become women?

Because the nature of women's body and mind is distinct from that of men, their behavioural sphere has become characteristically distinct from that of men. Nowadays, under the influence of rebellion, a group of women are disavowing this basic fact. They say the behavioural sphere of women is completely the same as that of men.]

This concept of “educating women to become women” is nothing other than forcing a gender identity alongside a normative gender role upon young girls. Tagore's approach limited him to conceiving of his female students as enactors of normative gender roles in the conventional society of their future.

Upto 1908, the school at Santiniketan was exclusively for boys. The concept of the brahmachari was also male; it is indicative of the times that even though the concept as well as examples of brahmacharini, or the female counterpart of brahmachari, are indeed present in the Vedas, the issue of including girls was not even a question during the onset of Brahmavidyalya. It is not as if Tagore was unaccustomed to the practice of female education. All the daughters and daughters-in-law who belonged to Tagore's generation in Devendranath Tagore's family received formal education. Even Tagore's own wife, Mrinalini Devi, was enrolled at Loreto Girls' School in Calcutta after her marriage; however, there does not exist any record of actually how much studying she did there. Tagore's three daughters were educated at home because he certainly did not approve of the existing girls' schools that operated according to the colonial model. There was, for some time, the prospect of enrolling Tagore's precociously intelligent, eldest daughter Madhurilata (Bela) at the new school that Sarala Ray was founding (Gokhale Memorial Girls' School) but it did not materialize. Tagore had also consulted Sister Nibedita about his daughters' education. In spite of all this, when it came to starting a school, he started Brahmavidyalaya with only male students. In fact, in all the essays on education translated as a part of this dissertation, Tagore refers to students as boys.

The concern about educating and including girls in his school must have lain dormant within Tagore until 1908, when it witnessed the first admission of female students. Revolutionary

and shocking for the times, there was no separate female section of the school: the classes were coeducational. Tagore had to face ceaseless criticism everywhere for this new addition to his school. At that time, coeducation was absolutely new to Bengal and Santiniketan the only place where it was practised. Tagore's resolution, however, was firm in the face of such criticism and opposition. In a 1909 letter written to Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty, he mentions the opposition as well as more restrictions that were placed on the female students:

স্ত্রীবিদ্যালয় সম্বন্ধে কতকগুলি নিয়ম স্থির করা কর্তব্য। নতুবা ওখানকার বালক-বিদ্যালয়ের সঙ্গে হয়ত তার সুর না মেলবার আশঙ্কা আছে। বিদ্যালয়ের অধ্যাপকদেরো অনেকের মন বোধহয় এ সম্বন্ধে পীড়িত হচ্ছে – সেটা ঠিক কল্যাণকর নয়। অবশ্য যেখানে কোনো অন্যায় নেই সেখানে কারো সংস্কারের দিকে তাকাবার দরকার নেই – কিন্তু সংস্কারকে একেবারেই অশ্রাব্য করারও প্রয়োজন দেখিনে। তার মানে, কাজ থাকলে কাজ চালাতে হবে, কিন্তু যেখানে কাজ নেই সেখানে সতর্ক হওয়া উচিত। মেয়েরা শান্তিনিকেতনে, জগদানন্দের বাড়ীতে বা নীচের বাংলোয় অত্যন্ত প্রয়োজন ব্যতীত স্বেচ্ছামত যাতায়াত করতে পারবে না, এই নিয়ম করে দিযো – এবং ক্লাসের প্রয়োজনের বাইরে অধ্যাপকদের সঙ্গেও তাদের যোগ থাকবে না। ওদের ওঠা খাওয়া প্রভৃতির সময় সুনির্দিষ্ট থাকবে এবং বাইরে বেড়াতে যাওয়ার সময় তাদের কত্রীকে সঙ্গে নিয়ে যাবে এইরকম স্থির থাকা ভাল।⁸⁴

[It is our duty to set some rules for the girls' school. Or else there is the fear of there being a disharmony with the boys' school there. Many of the teachers of the school are possibly troubled by this – that is not conducive to general welfare. Of course, there is no need to pay attention to anybody's prejudices where there is no wrong, but I do not see the need to regard conventions as completely immaterial. That is, where there is a need, action has to be taken but where there is no need, one must be careful. Girls should not be able to freely come and go to the Santiniketan house, the house of Jagadananda or the bungalow lying below unless there is some very strong need.⁸⁵ Make this the rule. They should also not have any connection with the teachers outside the needs of the classes. There should be fixed times for their

⁸⁴ Bani Niyogi, *Sreesadaner Itihaash* (Santiniketan: Rabindrabhavana, 2001), 17.

⁸⁵ “the bungalow lying below” refers to the house where Dwijendranath Tagore lived with his family. It was called “*nichu bungalow*” as the land of Santiniketan was undulating and the bungalow lay lower than the rest of the ashram.

waking up, meals etc. and if they go out they have to be accompanied by their mistress.]

This letter clearly reveals that Santiniketan did not provide an atmosphere of complete freedom for the girls, but what is more significant is that Tagore himself does not wish to disavow social conventions completely. Rather, he wishes to uphold some for the sake of caution. In spite of these measures there occurred two incidents that disrupted the running of the female section. A romantic relation grew between Ajit Kumar Chakravarty and a young widow, Labanyalekha, who was a student of the school, and they finally married. This created a great scandal. The irony of the above-quoted letter being written to Ajit Kumar and the event involving him is certainly not lost on anyone. There was also a tragic incident when Saroj Kumar, a student, committed suicide and there were reasons to suspect that it was motivated by a relationship with a girl. Rumours ran thick and fast at the school and no contemporary account mentions these events clearly. Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar state that Sushila Devi, who was in charge of the female students, had to face a lot of criticism from all sides and refused to continue in her post. Giribala Devi took up the responsibility for some time but after a Puja vacation, she too did not return to take up her charge again.⁸⁶

These administrative obstacles caused the female section to be stopped temporarily. Amita Sen is the lone voice among the writers of memorial accounts of the Brahmavidyalaya period, who refers to a suicide having taken place (she does not mention the name of the student or the cause of his suicide) and having led to the closing of the residential female section. She writes,

...বালিকাদের আশ্রম ছেড়ে যাবার আগের সারা রাত রবীন্দ্রনাথ দেহলী বাড়িতে আপন মনে গান গেয়ে কাটিয়েছেন, সবই তীব্র বেদনার গান। সেই রাতটিতে রবীন্দ্রনাথ ও বালিকাদের কারো চোখে ঘুম ছিল না। ভোরবেলা যাবার জন্য প্রস্তুত হয়ে বালিকারা রবীন্দ্রনাথকে প্রণাম করতে দেহলী বাড়িতে গেলে রবীন্দ্রনাথ সিঁড়ি দিয়ে নেমে এলেন। ব্যথাভরা মনে রুদ্ধ কণ্ঠে বালিকাদের মাথায় হাত রেখে আশীর্বাদ করলেন।⁸⁷

[... Rabindranath spent the night before the girl students departed from the ashram at the Dehali house, singing to himself songs of intense suffering. There was no

⁸⁶ Ghosh & Sarkar, 54.

⁸⁷ Sen, 24-25.

sleep for either Rabindranath or the girls that night. At dawn, when the girls, prepared to depart, went to Dehali in order to touch his feet, he came down the stairs. With a sad heart and choked throat, he blessed each girl by placing his hand on their heads.]

The pathos of this departure is certainly deep. The modern reader would also note that at least Tagore's grief has been recorded for the posterity, but what those girls felt when life shut upon them the door to education that Santiniketan had promised, has no record anywhere. How they must have each sorrowed and reflected remains unknown to posterity, just like so many women's stories are simply lost – unspoken, unwritten and forgotten with time.

Girls returned as students to Santiniketan once again when the daughters of the teachers there grew up one by one and started studying at the school. Tagore had kept striving in the interim period to set up a permanent residential house for the female students. During the time the female section was operational, four houses were used periodically as residences for the girls. In 1921, finally, Sri Sadan was built as the residence for female students and gave a second beginning to female education at the ashram. Incidentally, 1921 was also the founding year of Visva-Bharati University.

PART II

**[Translations of Selected Essays by Tagore on the topic of School
Education]**

THE TRANSITIONS IN EDUCATION¹

There is no doubt that there exists a lot of shortcomings in our Bengali literature; various subjects of study such as philosophy, science and others have not as yet been published in adequate amount in the Bengali language; and because of that, in order to properly acquire education, there is no other way but to resort to a foreign language. But I often feel that there would be time enough later to bemoan the issue—for now it is getting impossible to function without one or two textbooks for children.

There is no dearth of books of alphabets or books of child morality, but I do not regard them as textbooks for children.

Books of the world, in general, can be divided into two main categories—readable books and unreadable books. It would not be wrong to judge the books selected by a text-book committee to be belonging to the second category.

Some people think that I am simply jesting. Committees can do a lot of good for the country; oil mills, cement factories, politics and community festivals have been seen to be run by committees but as yet, in this country, there has been no instance of any literature-related work being carried out successfully by a committee. When Mother Saraswati² becomes split amongst her children, she attains no good. Thus when the committee-selected books emerge as ones devoid entirely of all kinds of literary qualities, whom should we blame? When sugarcane emerges out of the juice extractor, no one expects it to bear any juice; not even “simpleminded”, unintelligent children.

Thus, even by regarding committees as an inevitably occurring ill-fortune and not commenting upon it, one can leave out the books generally used in schools from the category of textbooks. Grammars, dictionaries, geographical descriptions and morality lessons cannot be regarded as readable books of the world; they are merely books of the syllabus.

It is not the dharma of human nature to remain limited to only what is necessary. We are bound by the chains of necessity to some extent and free to some extent. Our bodies can be limited to five

¹ “*Shikshar Herpher*” was read out at the meeting of Rajshahi Association in 1892. It was first published in the December 1892 Issue of the *Sadhana* magazine.

² Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of Learning and Arts.

feet but it does not do to build houses limited exactly to that five feet. It is necessary to allocate a lot of space for free movement or else it impedes our health and happiness. This dictum applies also to education. If we limit children entirely to as much that is educational, that is, necessary, it cannot lead to the sufficient development of children's minds. If free reading is not mingled with necessary learning, boys³ cannot grow into good human beings—even when they grow into adulthood, they intellectually remain somewhat boylike.

But unfortunately, we have absolutely no time in hand. As soon as possible, we have to learn the foreign language, pass exams and start working. Therefore, right from childhood, we get no other time but for memorizing the lessons at top speed without paying heed to anything else. Thus, if we chance upon a book of their own liking in the hands of boys, we cannot but seize it away at that very instant.

Besides, where would they get a book of their own liking? There is no such book in Bengali. There exist the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* but the way boys are taught Bengali, they are left with no capacity to enjoy poetry on their own and out of their own volition at home. On the other hand, this unfortunate lot also does not know English enough to enter the world of English children's literature. Moreover, English books for children are in such pure English-- full of such details of English domestic life - that even the meritorious students of B.A., M.A. do not always find them easily accessible.

Thus, the turn of fate becomes such that for Bengali boys, there remains nothing left but grammars, dictionaries and descriptions of geography. There is none other so unfortunate as the Bengali boy. Where boys of other countries pleurably chew upon sugarcane with their newly-grown teeth, the Bengali boy hangs his dhoti-clad, thin, short legs from the bench and bears only the caning of his master- caning that is mingled with nothing other than the harsh abuse of his master.

The result of it is that the digesting power declines from all sides. Just like the body of the Bengali boy- malnourished for want of enough sports and adequate food- his mental digestive system too fails to develop fully. No matter how many B.A., M.A. degrees we acquire, no matter

³ Tagore unfailingly refers to the student as male. It opens up the essay to criticism from the perspective of gender. This translation avoids gender-neutrality in order to retain the problematic aspect of the original.

how many books we memorize, our intellect is not growing so strong or mature. We are not able to grasp anything strongly in our fist, we are not able to create anything, we are not being able to assert anything. Our opinions, conversations and customs are not really like an adult's. Thus, we attempt to conceal our mental poverty under the garb of hyperbole, pomp and showmanship.

The chief cause of this is that right from childhood, there is no joy in our learning. We have only memorized that which is just necessary. It leads us to somehow manage but not truly develop. Air does not fill one's belly; one needs food for that but in order to properly digest that food, one needs air. Similarly, in order to digest one textbook, one needs the aid of multiple readable books. As one reads with pleasure, one's ability to read grows imperceptibly; one's ability to absorb knowledge, one's understanding and thinking powers grow in strength easily and naturally.

But it is beyond one's conception how the Bengali would evade this dismal, mental-faculty-eroding education.

Firstly, English as a language is extremely foreign. It has no similarity with our language in its diction or framing of words. On top of that, the framing of thoughts and subject matter too are foreign. Nothing about it is familiar and so, even before any comprehension, one has to start rote-learning. The results are similar to swallowing one's food without chewing. It might be so that a children's Reader has a tale about haymaking- the subject is very familiar to the English boy; or a snowball fight between Charlie and Katie can be highly humorous for an English child but when our boys read all of this in a foreign language, they cannot associate it with any memory of theirs nor can they visualize it. They have to grope entirely in the dark.

Of the teachers who teach in the lower classes, some have passed their Entrance Examination⁴ while some have failed in it. The English language, thoughts, customs or literature- none of it is familiar to them. They are the ones who first introduce us to the English language. They know neither good Bengali nor good English; their only convenience is that it is much easier to make children forget rather than to make them learn and they carry out this function with complete success.

⁴ Entrance examination refers to the University Entrance Examination that a student had to take in order to pursue higher studies after a twelve-year school course.

The poor souls cannot be blamed. “The horse is a noble animal”- in order to translate this into Bengali, one cannot maintain proper Bengali and the English too gets muddled up. How is this idea to be expressed? “The horse is a great animal”, “The horse is a superior animal”, “The horse is a good animal”- none of them is really suitable so it becomes preferable to fudge the details. There is no saying how much of such adulteration keeps happening in our primary education of English. Resultantly, in our young age we learn such little English, littered with so many errors, that it becomes impossible for the boys to derive something pleasurable from it- no one expects them to do so either. Both master and student say that we have no business in deriving pleasure; if we can somehow extract a meaning, the task is over, the examination too can be passed, and a job can be acquired. About the meaning that is generally extracted, it can be said *a là* Sankaracharya:

Arthamanartham bhāvaya nityam

nāstitataḥ sukhaleśaḥ satyam

“Regard meaning as disaster- there is no pleasure or truth in it.”

Then what remains in the fortune of the boys? Had they learnt only Bengali, they would have been able to read the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*- had they learnt nothing, then they would have had the leisure to strengthen their bodies, gladden their souls and satisfy their childish nature by climbing trees, jumping in water, plucking flowers and tormenting Mother Nature in a variety of such ways. By trying to learn English, they neither learnt nor played- they were left with no opportunity to enter the domain of Nature’s truth and the door to the imaginary world of literature too remained closed to them. The two free and open pastures that exist internally and externally- from where mankind draws health and life force- where various colours, smells, varied movements and songs, affection and happiness are ever prospering in an attempt to invigorate and develop us fully- being banished from the motherland, in what foreign prison are these children shackled? For whom God has inspired love in the hearts of parents, has made the mother’s lap so tender- those who are small in size yet even after occupying all the empty spaces of a house, they find not enough space to play- where are they being compelled to spend their childhood? In the grammar and dictionary of English. Where there is no life, no joy, no leisure, no youth, no space to even move an inch- they have to live in that very dry, hard, narrowness. Can this be conducive to any boy’s

mental nourishment, broadening of the mental horizon or strengthening of his character? Does he not remain somehow pallid, thin and underdeveloped? Upon attaining adulthood, is he able to work something out by his intellect- to overcome hindrances by his own strength- to hold his head high by dint of his natural vigour? Does he not merely learn to memorize, to imitate and to be a slave?

There lies a connection between one's stages of life. It is needless to say that one's youth is slowly shaped by one's childhood. It is not as if, during youth, one readily gets access to what one needs at once after entering one's workplace- the truly dependable and completely necessary things develop slowly in our lives just like our limbs do. They are not like any readymade object that can be bought extant from the market at the hour of need.

There is no doubt that thinking power and power of imagination are two strengths inevitably required for the leading of human life. That is to say that in order to become a true human being, those two things cannot be taken away from life. Thus it is a fact as old as the hills that if thought and imagination are not cultivated right from childhood, they would not be present at the hour of need.

But in our present education system, the path towards that is, in a way, closed. We need to remain engaged for a long time in only the study of language. I have already stated that English is such a foreign language and our teachers, in general, are so poorly educated that the language cannot easily enter into our minds. Thus we have to wait for a long period for our minds to become somewhat familiar with English concepts and for all that while, our thinking power, having nothing better to do, remains entirely inert. Till the Entrance and First-Arts⁵ Examinations, time flies by in only learning workable and average English; immediately after that we are made to face the heavy books and serious thought-consuming concepts of the B.A. class- then we are left with neither enough time nor the ability to truly learn them- we have to roll everything into one big ball and swallow it down in one gulp.

As we read, we do not simultaneously think that this means this- we are piling the heap up but not constructing anything alongside. When the bricks, mortar, sand and cement have reached

⁵ Tagore is referring to the First Degree Examination. It was a public examination held following the Intermediate Examination. The Intermediate examination was held after two years of college study.

sky-high, suddenly comes the order of the university--“Build a third floor.” Instantly we climbed upon the apex of the heap and hammered upon it for two years to somehow render it into a plain- it resembled a terrace to some extent. But is this called a manor? Is there any path for air and light to enter into it? Is there any shelter for human beings to live within it? Can it safeguard us properly from the immense heat and vulnerability of the external world? Can one perceive any organization, beauty or grace within it?

There is no doubt that the ingredients gathered are huge in quantity; previously we did not have access to all these building materials for a mansion of the mind. But it is a huge error when it is assumed that one has learnt to build simply by virtue of learning to collect. When both collection and construction develop slowly and simultaneously, then only is the job properly done.

Thus, proper education occurs when immediately after collecting one learns the usage, understands its true form and simultaneously builds up a sheltered place for life. On one hand man is growing up and on the other his learning is accumulated- on one hand food is heaping up in the storage while on the other the digestive system is breaking itself down by its own juices- such a never-seen-before occurrence is taking place in our country.

Therefore, if one wishes to rear a boy to become a true human being, then the process has to begin right from childhood or else he would remain a boy and never become a true human being. Right from childhood, not relying upon the power of memory entirely, enough space must be given for the free exercise of the powers of thinking and imagination. From morning till evening, this process of tilling with the plough and breaking clods with ladder- only a beating stick, memorizing and examination- it is not enough if we wish to reap gold off this rare field, it is just not enough. There must exist water with this dry dust, with this unbroken labour of tilling and sowing, because the wetter the soil, the better would be the paddy. On top of that, there comes a time when the paddyfield is in particular need of rainfall. If that time passes by in futility, all the rain in the world cannot make the crop good. Similarly there comes a juncture during one’s development when the sense of being alive and the young buds of imagination become indispensable for the maturing and prospering of life. If then comes down a heavy shower from the sky of literature, then it is “Glory to the good King and Holy is the mighty land.” When the newly germinated saplings of the soul are first raising their heads from the dark womb towards the immense world and limitless sky- when young wonder, young love and young curiosity are raising their heads everywhere- then if

there blows the wind of thought, and blessing and light rain down on them from the land of eternal happiness- then only would their lives be successful, happy and fully developed in due course of time. But if at that time, only dry dust and hot sand- only dry grammar and foreign dictionary- overlay their existence, then even if they later receive a thundering shower, the varied new living truths of European literature, multifaceted imagination and lofty ideals would not be able to make much of an impression on them. It would no longer be possible to easily manifest the innate life force of literature in their lives.

The prime time of life passes by mired in the lifeless education of ours. From childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to youth- we enter only dragging with us the burden of words. We toil like wage workers in Saraswati's empire¹- our spinal cords grow twisted and there happens no holistic development of humanity. When we do enter the world of English thoughts, we cannot explore it like someone really familiar. Even if we manage to understand the thoughts, we cannot imbibe those into our hearts; we use them in lectures and in writing but cannot translate them into actions in our lives.

In this way the concepts we learn for the first twenty or twenty-two years of our lives attain no chemical mixture with our lives, rendering a very strange appearance to our minds indeed. Some of the learnt concepts are glued stuck while some drop away with the passing time. The way uncivilized people feel a sense of pride in the colours and tattoos they anoint their skins with and thus overcast the natural brilliance and beauty of healthy skin, we too layer ourselves similarly with foreign education and roam vainly. There exists very little connect between that and our real inner lives. The way in which uncivilized kings bedeck their bodies with a few cheap foreign glass beads and decorate unsuitable places with foreign ornaments- they do not even understand how strange and hilarious their action is- similarly, we too flaunt about a few cheap and glittering foreign words and perhaps try to use some of the great English concepts in entirely uncontextual places without understanding that unconsciously, we are acting in such a great farce. If we see anyone laughing, we immediately start quoting from significant instances of European history.

If from the very childhood there can be a simultaneous learning of language and thoughts and if life can be regulated by thoughts, then only can there be a real compatibility with our entire lives- we can be like natural human beings and take a true measure of everything.

When we properly consider that our education is not in keeping with the way we live our lives, the house where we would live our whole lives in- the blueprint of that house is not to be found in our textbooks- the society where we would spend all of our lives draws none of its high ideals from our newly-learnt literature- we do not see the manifestation of it in our mother, father, friend, brother or sister- our daily routine finds no mention in its description- our sky and earth, our clear morning and beautiful evening, our overflowing fields of crops and the music of the reigning goddess of our country who takes the shape of river, have no place in it- then only do we understand that there is no natural chance of our education being intimately integrated into our lives. There would always exist a gulf between the two; our education would never be able to fill all the absences in our lives. The shower of learning falls miles away from where lies the root of our lives- what little water percolates through all the obstacles is too little to drive away the parchedness of our existence. The education in which we spend all our lives fits us out only to become clerks or be engaged in such other trade. The trunk where we lock away our hat and shawl- our work wear- we also lock away all our learning in that very trunk. It has no use in our humdrum daily existence and this has become inevitable by virtue of our present mode of education. It is wrong to blame our students for this. The world of their books is at one pole while the world they live in at the other, the bridge between the two being made of only grammar and dictionary. Thus when we come across an individual who is highly learned in European philosophy, science and logic, we are not surprised to see the same individual lovingly nurturing the eternal superstitions- on one hand he promotes the high ideals of independence while on the other he shackles himself and others in multiple chains of dependence at every other instance- on one hand he is separately enjoying literature coloured in multifarious shades while on the other he does not want to raise his life to the heights of ideals, rather he remains involved in earning wealth and increasing material prosperity. The reason for this is that there exists an unbridgeable gulf between learning and behavioural existence- the two of them have never had the opportunity of being joined cohesively.

Resultantly, the two become increasingly antagonistic towards each other. Since our life keeps going against our learnt lessons, we develop a complete mistrust and disregard for that learning. It seems as if that thing is entirely fake and the entire European civilization is founded upon that fakeness. What we have is true in all its totality and the direction towards which our education points us leads to the domain of the great falsehood- the illusory civilization. We do not think that it is our misfortune that owing to certain specific reasons, our education has proved futile

for us; rather, we decide that the cause of this great futility must be within our very nature. Accordingly, the more we disrespect our education, the more it goes against our life and it is rendered incapable of exerting its complete influence upon our lives. In this way the separation of our lived reality from our education keeps increasing to the point where each intensely mocks the other and Bengali life, with its incomplete living and incomplete education, becomes nothing more than a great farce.

So the education to which we devote one-third of our lives remains inconsistent with our lived reality and we also remain deprived of the chance of learning anything else. Then by dint of which power would we achieve realization in life?

The facilitation of a cohesion between this education and our lives has thus become the greatest issue deserving of attention at present.

But who can facilitate this cohesion? Bengali language and Bengali literature. When Bankim-babu's *Bangadarshan*⁶ had risen on the sky of Bengal like a new sun, there was the awakening of a wonderful joy within the mental horizon of all the educated populace. Did *Bangadarshan* discover any new idea unknown hitherto to European philosophy, science or history? No, it is not so. Through the medium of *Bangadarshan*, a great talent bridged the gap between our English education and our inner world- after ages, there occurred the happy union between the heart and the thoughts- it brightened our homes with the light of celebration of the emigrant returning home. For all this time, Krishna was ruling over Mathura; for a long twenty to twenty-five years, after begging the gatekeeper, we could only catch a distant glimpse of him. *Bangadarshan* acted as the ambassador who brought him to our Brindavan.⁷ Now a new light illumined our homes, our society and our minds. We could envision the women of our own homes

⁶ Eminent Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (years), who also founded the influential Bengali literary magazine *Bangadarshan* in 1872. Most of his novels were serialized in this magazine.

⁷ According to Hindu mythology, when Krishna left Brindavan for Mathura and became a prime political figure over there, it became impossible for him to return to Brindavan. He, then, sent a messenger to the Gopis in Brindavan who were waiting so eagerly for his return.

as Suryamukhi and Kamalmani,⁸ Chandrasekhar and Pratap⁹ elevated the Bengali man to a higher ideological ground- a great light fell upon our insignificant daily lives.

The result of *Bangadarshan* having introduced us to the taste of that incomparable new joy is that the educated people of the present are now interested in expressing their thoughts and ideas in the Bengali language. We have comprehended this much, that English may be the language of work but it is not the language of the mind. We can see the evidence of the fact that even though we meticulously study English right from our childhoods, still all our permanent literature of the present is being composed in Bengali. The chief reason for it is that the Bengali can never be so familiar with the English language as to be capable of easily expressing the free play of emotions that can be found in literature. Even if he acclimatizes himself with the language to such an extent, there cannot be a lively depiction of Bengali thoughts and feelings in the language of the Englishman. All the particular sweetness and all the particular memories that drive us towards their literary expression, all the cultural norms that have hereditarily shaped our psyche, can never find their true and free expression in the foreign language.

So, whenever educated people resort to the Bengali language in an urge to express thoughts and feelings, a weakness is manifested. Alas for the neglected and sensitive language! Where is she now? After such prolonged neglect, would she surrender to the man vain of his education, with all her beauty and glory? O educated nobleman, do you know the true value of this tender, young and graceful language of ours? Have you ever comprehended the bright laughter of her eyes, the pathos of her tears, the scorching heat of her personality or the affection and devotion that blossom from her? Have you ever taken them to your heart? Your stance is that since I have read Mill and Spencer- have acquired all the degrees- since I am such a free-thinking and meritorious young man- when fathers, bowed down by the burden of marriageable daughters, have come begging to my doorstep with all that they have, then that language belonging to those uneducated, common and rustic people should come and surrender herself at my feet at my slightest indication. That I write in Bengali even after being English-educated, is the highest of fortune that can happen to

⁸ Female characters from Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's novels

⁹ Male characters from Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's novels

her! I have sacrificed the glory that I could have so easily acquired by writing in English for the sake of expressing all such lofty ideals in Bengali for this poor country- so all the meagre obstacles, like the scantily-clad poor respectfully clearing the path for the king, should have hurriedly stepped away from my path. Just think how I am obliging you! I can tell you one or two things about political economy- I have learnt how the rules of evolution apply everywhere from the animal kingdom to society to the spiritual world and I would not make a complete secret of that either. In my historical and philosophical essays, I would furnish footnotes with my collection of quotes and instances from obscure and complex texts. And the Bengali would not remain oblivious of what which critic opines about which book of English literature. But if this poorly-clad, incomplete language does not advance to bow before me at once when ordered, then I would not write in Bengali- I will be a lawyer or a deputy magistrate- I would write leaders in English newspapers- and there is no accounting how the interest of you all would be hampered.

It is sheer misfortune on the part of Bengal that this modest yet spirited daughter does not advance to welcome all such excellent young men, and the young men too get vexed enough to break off from the Bengali language. They don't even write letters in Bengali; when they meet their friends, they use Bengali as economically as they can and they ignominiously exile all Bengali books to the female quarters of the house. This is what can be called a grave punishment for a slight offence.

I have already stated that we do not get thoughts with language when we are educated as children, and as we grow up, the opposite takes place- the thoughts start emerging but the language is absent. I have also mentioned that since the learning of language and the learning of thoughts do not develop as intrinsically linked, we do not receive a close understanding of European thought and that is why, nowadays, many educated people have started expressing disregard for all European thoughts. On the other hand, they have also not had the close proximity of their own mother tongue and being distant from it, they have developed contempt towards their mother tongue. Rather than admitting that they do not know Bengali, they say, "Can any thought be really expressed in Bengali? This language is not suited to educated minds such as ours." The truth is that when the grapes are beyond our reach, we often unconsciously deride them as sour.

From whichever point of view, the cohesion between our language and our lives has been eradicated. Being thus disconnected, man is becoming futile- he is not being able to stand strong

as he has no sense of one unified wholeness within him- he has no access to what is necessary at the hour of need. There is a tale that says that there was a poor man who saved little by little during winters for a woollen garment but when he finally had enough, it was already summer; and during summer, when he tried to save for lighter clothing, it progressed to autumn. When God was moved to mercy by his plight and wanted to grant him a boon, he said, “I don’t want anything else- rid me of this lack of cohesion. That throughout my life, I get woollens during summer and cotton during winter- if you can correct this somehow, my life would be fulfilled.”

We too pray for the same. We can reach our full potential if this is removed. All our penury is because of the fact that we do not get woolens during winter and cotton during summer. Apart from it, we have everything else. Now we pray to God- just bring a cohesion between our hunger and food, woollens with winter, thoughts with language and education with life. Our life resembles

Pāni mein mīn piyāsi

Sunat sunat lāge hānsi¹⁰

We have both *pāni* (water) and *piyās* (thirst); seeing this, all the people of the world are laughing and our eyes are tearing up but we are unable to drink.

¹⁰ Hindi proverb. Can be translated as “Fish are thirsty in water; one laughs upon hearing this”.

MORAL EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS¹

Nowadays our students have become very fretfully busy regarding moral education. There is such an abundance of committees, lectures and pamphlets that if the greatness of these few ingredients could possibly lead to the excellence of morality then one could hope that the boys of the present times would reveal themselves as morality incarnate like Yudhisthir, the son of Dharma;² and if there is any delay in such a fruition then that is because of the lack of morality in the characters of the students and not because of the futility of the pamphlets.

There is such a movement regarding morality in students that one can easily think that all of a sudden, there is such an increase of immorality in the youths of this country that it would be indispensable to not appear to be “John the Baptist.” The Lieutenant Governor is publishing circulars, non-political well-wishers of the country are creating committees, principals of some colleges are trying to set up examination on “morality” and many are busy in preparing “moral textbooks” as per their capacity.

The whole situation appears to be like a fad. If anyone believes that it is possible to elevate moral sensibility simply by making one read “moral textbooks”, then I would like to say no more than humorously applaud such a belief. Such faith can move mountains- immorality is simply a fly. “To steal is a great sin”, “Never speak lies”- if such fixed tenets could prevent the human mind from committing evil then there would never arise an occasion to worry. These tenets are well known for ages and there is no need to publish new textbooks for it.

Some textbooks make one think that for the sake of moral education of children it is necessary to use the word “moral” in a certain narrow sense. Are the characters of our students so degenerate that there is need for so much discussion on this one topic alone? A professor of Rajshahi College has published a book titled *Controlling the Senses* which is such that I am hesitant

¹ “*Chhatrader Neetishiksha*” (First published in the January, 1893 issue of the magazine *Sadhana*)

² According to the Indian epic Mahabharata, Yudhisthir was the eldest son of Queen Kunti, conceived as a result of her union with the god Dharma. So Yudhisthir is frequently referred to as “Dharmaputra” or the son of Dharma in popular parlance. In Mahabharata, he is titled Dharmaraaj or the King who who establish the rule of dharma over India.

to hand such a book to children. It is impossible to critique such a book in a monthly magazine read by children and women.

The honourable professor has handled one particular topic from various angles to show that certain instincts are considered universally impure. Is he under the impression that those who, disregarding society and their relatives, are involved in wrong deeds in secret would grow extremely interested in correcting their characters the moment they read that paperback? And for those who are not inclined towards such instincts, is it necessary or befitting to discuss such issues with them? Moreover this book has been mandatory not only for reading but also for buying by all the students of the Rajshahi College.

A sharp-tongued friend of mine had stated in a lecture of his that nowadays moral education has only two significances: i) to salute the government workers and ii) shear away some descriptive portions from Sanskrit poetry. There is no need to teach the first one in schools or colleges; the learning of it would be automatically acquired when one would leave school and start soliciting for a job. It might be necessary to shear way some descriptive portions of Sanskrit poetry at certain times but at least those descriptive portions are poetry. I see no need to shear way such contexts from poetry and discuss them drily in a moral textbook. I consider it extremely ugly to deal with such mud in the textbooks of boys.

The desire and attempt to inculcate moral education is undoubtedly praiseworthy. All I have to say is that there is no chance of fulfilling this task through a few fixed tenets. That which is called “copy-book morality” in English has never been revealed to have corrected anyone’s character. Moral books simply state that this is right, that is wrong; it is like a catalogue of right and wrong. To gain a working knowledge of the just and the unjust, there is no need of a catalogue. There are a few unknown sins in the world. The severely wrong deeds are universally acknowledged as wrong even the professional thieves do not consider stealing as a moral deed.

According to the Hindu scriptures, certain deeds, done knowingly or unknowingly, are irrespectively evil. Where the scriptures mention that one has to sit facing right, it might be a sin to sit facing left- this might not be known to all. But such kind of right and wrong is not under discussion for now. It is maybe, impossible to regard any of the wrong deeds that can be mentioned in a moral textbook for boys as right even as a mistake.

Before deciding the process of moral education, it is necessary to determine the foundation of morality. Before starting to build a wall, it is better to think about the foundation, the materials and the plan for building and keeping the wall standing straight. It is logical to look for the cause of the flaw before attempting to correct a character flaw. If one tries to cure a disease before knowing the cause of the disease, the result may be opposite.

The desire for pleasure is the single motivating factor in the human heart. No one suffers willingly. Many would immediately protest at hearing this but let me explain this a bit. One might need to undergo suffering many a time in order to fulfil one's duties but one's innermost pleasure lies in fulfilling the duty and that pleasure is stronger than the suffering or it might lead to greater pleasure in the future and avoid greater suffering and that is why we undergo suffering for the sake of duty. I do not want to raise deep philosophical debate over here but perhaps everyone would accept at least that people resort to evil for the sake of pleasure and the only way to avoid temptation is an innate sense of duty.

A simple way to sustain a man on the path of duty both internally and externally is dharma. But here I do not want to raise the debate of religion nor is it required. This path is closed to us. Teachers have been ordered to deliver moral education and prohibited from giving religious education. On top of that it is not as if, a lot of religious education happens at home. Some people of the society with New Education are openly agnostic and the rest are Hindu in name, but what in deed is difficult to determine. So it is unnecessary to discuss delivering moral education through religion.

Another easy way for moral education is to inspire the fear of legal punishment or societal censure. For the clever, this kind of moral education only signifies do not get caught. Moreover, the state of our society is such that if you touch a lower caste person you would immediately become a social outcast but if you cheat someone, lie, be a drunkard, fritter away your life in ugly pleasure- society would accept this without batting an eyelid and welcome you cordially and if you hail from a high caste or are a *kulin* and possess some wealth then they would express interest to marry their daughter to you. It has even been heard that the only objection to the assimilation of people returned from a prison sentence back to the society, was that it is hard to maintain the strictures relating to diet as per religion in the prison. It is unnecessary to waste any word discussing the value of censure from such a society.

Human nature, in particular child nature, is prone to imitation and fond of praises. The culture that takes deep roots within oneself through the examples of one's elders and loved ones, their praises and censures, during the childhood, become instrumental in regulating one's life. But the examples that the boys see in front of them at home can in no way be conducive to moral development. A son learns from his dry moral textbook at school that it is a sin to lie; and he returns home to see that his father, brother, uncle and others enjoyably consume the meat of two or four legged creatures cooked for them by Muslim chefs but outside they pretend that they do not partake forbidden food and if required, they do not hesitate to lie directly about it. Moreover, at the same place, if a religious society is established in order to safeguard ancient Hinduism, then the boy would perceive that his father, brother and uncles who consume forbidden food are all members of that society; and within the rules of the religious society, he would find that anyone who acts illicitly with regard to consuming food "publicly," would be regarded as a social outcast. (Would any naive reader be struck with wonder at the knowledge that in this latter half of the nineteenth century, the existence of such religious society and rules is not a product of my imagination?) Even if the boy be really simpleminded it would not take long for him to understand that the abovementioned rule has only one significance- do what you will in secret, if needed, lie, in spite of knowing everything we would pretend to be deaf and dumb, we would raise no objection; but be cautious, do not speak the truth, that would lead to your ruin. Living within this humungously alive lie, can this boy ever develop an innate devotion to truth?

Examples be damned, it is not as if any moral education happens at home through instructions. The relation of the fatherly elders (and all elders belong to this category) with the boys is akin to that of a householder's with a thief. They make no attempt to reach the hearts of the boys and nor do they manage to do so. The boys understand that these fatherly elders have been created only to scold them reasonably or unreasonably and to chide them with "go and study." Praise from the elders being really rare does indeed reach their hearts but unadulterated praise is almost impossible to get from the elders. Moreover, they are so distant from the boys that their reproach or censure leaves no mark on the minds of the boys; besides they always scold- that is their single most action. So boys feel somewhat uneasy while receiving the upbraiding but that is not because they have erred but because they are being scolded and are in the fear of getting a beating.

In the inner quarters of the home, in order to safeguard her son from the father's discipline the mother herself lies and teaches her son to lie. Boys go to the inner quarters for meals and pampering. The inner quarters are not a space for moral education or education of any kind. What education can the uneducated mothers who need to shoulder the responsibility of motherhood at an age when they are girls, possibly give! They are only able to love and nothing more than blind love can be expected from them.

The right way to moral education is to blossom the beauty of duty and purity in the mind during childhood. If you wish you root the culture of purity, truth, sympathy, non-violence etc deeply in the heart, then the beauty of these virtues must be made clear so that the mind is naturally attracted towards them. It would have to be pointed out how ugly impurity, anger, jealousy and violence are. And character has to be moulded in such a manner that the way we recoil with hesitation and repugnance at the thought of touching something dirty or horrible, similarly we would feel repugnance at the thought of contact with impurity and hesitation to carry out any wrong action. The way we teach boys to stop wallowing in mud and take pleasure in staying neat and clean, similarly they should be taught to stay away from impure and wrong deeds. But this kind of education cannot be achieved via a few dry moral tenets; it depends on keeping a watchful eye at every home on a hundred tiny things at every step, it depends on entering the child's heart and understanding their happiness and sorrow, pain and pleasure with sympathy. Purity and beauty of righteousness cannot be perceived in the fixed tenets of morality- if you wish them to feel within their hearts how beautiful purity is and how ugly impurity, then let me read good novels and poetry. There is no association of moral textbooks with the heart.

Our moralists are very against pleasure and merry-making. But according to me, if you wish to keep the mind away from illicit, impure pleasure then it is essential indeed to provide legitimate pleasures and merry-making. If the society has no room for legitimate pleasure and merry-making, people would naturally look for illicit pleasure beyond the society- a thousand moral tenets would not be able to fulfil the desire for pleasure. Our society resembles a home which is devoid of happiness and not always a peaceful one; so people are obliged to go elsewhere for the sake of fun and games and rest. Patriots would be angry at hearing this but I feel that it would have been better had we a "home life" like the Britishers.

TEXTBOOKS FOR STUDENTS' SCHOLARSHIPS¹

It is old wisdom that if the amount of eating exceeds digestive ability, it leads to no gain, rather it is harmful. Moreover, according to the nutritionists, it is not good to fulfil one's appetite a hundred percent, one or two percent must be spared. That it applies to mental appetite as well is not a new idea.

In this poor country of ours, it has to be accepted that no matter what the number of meals our boys have, for the sake of learning English, the pressure of their studies has become excessive. After teaching Bengali students for some time, the experience that Dr. Deli has published in the newspaper *The Statesman* proves the tragic yet laughable result of force-feeding this learning. Many Bengalis, rather than taking a cue from the mentioned article of Dr. Deli, have needlessly expressed their rage at it. Vanity is a salient feature of the weak Bengali character. We cannot tolerate the least of the attacks even from our well-wishers.

If at least up to the Entrance² class, the syllabus is in Bengali, it might lessen the torture upon children to some degree. But some people opine that the students who prepare themselves for the Entrance Examination after sitting for a Scholarship Examination³ do not acquire good results. First, there is no adequate proof for their statement; second, the way they are educated up to the level of the Scholarship Examination, it is obvious that the purpose of education would not be fulfilled. The number of subjects that the examinees of the Scholarship Examination have to study within eleven or twelve years has no parallel anywhere. We furnish a list of textbooks of Entrance schools following vernacular medium alongside the textbooks followed by schools under St. Xavier's College below. The first category has nine classes while the second has eight classes besides the Infant class. So we are comparing the Infant class of St. Xavier's with the ninth class

¹ "*Chhatrabrittir Pathyapustak*". It was first published in the August- September 1895 Issue of the magazine *Sadhana*.

² The class that culminated in the student sitting for the University Entrance Examination. A student was eligible to sit for the examination after a twelve-year school course.

³ The Scholarship Examination was for securing scholarships to finance higher studies after school.

of the earlier category of schools.⁴ If the age of sixteen years is deemed as appropriate for sitting for the Entrance, then one has to assume that school education begins at the age of seven.

Bengali School

Class Nine

(age: 7 years)

English: i) *Peary Sarkar's First Book*

ii) *Modern Spelling Book; Word Lessons*

Bengali: iii) *Barna Parichay* by Ramananda Chattopadhyay

iv) *Shishiksha Second Part*

v) *Shishiksha Third Part*

Mathematics: vi) Arithmetic

vii) *Dharapāt*

Geography: viii) Oral

St. Xavier's School

Infant Class

(age: 7 years)

English: i) *Longman's Infant Reader*

ii) *Longman's Second Primer*

Mathematics: iii) Counting till Hundred. Addition, Subtraction and Multiplication

Class Eight

(age: 8 years)

English: i) *Peary Sarkar's Second Book*

ii) *Modern Spelling Book*

iii) *Grammar and Composition* by Gangadharbabu

⁴ The ninth class is not to be confused with the class nine of the present school system in India. The ninth class would have been the lowest class of the Bengali schools under the colonial school system.

Bengali: iv) *Nutan Pāth* by Chandranathbabu

v) *Bālyasakhā* by Chiranjeeb Sharma

vi) *Bengali Grammar* by Tarinibabu

Mathematics: vii) Arithmetic

viii) *Subhankari*⁵

ix) Mental Maths

History: x) *History of Bengal* by Rajkrishnababu

Geography: xi) *Introduction to Geography* by Shashibabu

Science: xii) *Ways of Health* by Cunningham

First Standard

(age: 8 years)

English: i) *Longman's New Reader No. 1*

ii) *Arithmetical Primer No. 1*

Class Seven

(age: 9 years)

English: i) *Royal Reader No. 2*

ii) *Child's Grammar and Composition*

Bengali: iii) *Sāhityaprasanga*

iv) *Padyapāth Vol. 2*

v) Bengali Grammar

Mathematics: vi) Arithmetic

vii) *Subhankari*

viii) Mental Maths

⁵ A system of mathematical calculation introduced by Subhankar Das. Das a mathematician born in 14th century Bengal. He wrote a number of formulae that children could memorize and solve mathematical problems easily with their help.

ix) Simple Measurements

x) *Geometry* by Brahmamohan

History: xi) *History of Bengal*

xii) *Introduction to Geography*

xiii) Brief Description of Bengal and Assam (topic)

Science: xiv) *Foundation of Agriculture*

xv) *Ways of Health*

xvi) *Health Education* by Bharatchandra

Second Standard

(age: 9 years)

English: i) *Longman's New Reader No. 2*

ii) *Arithmetical Primer No. 1*

History: iii) History of Bible (topic)

Class Six

(age: 10 years)

English: i) *Royal Readers No. 3*

ii) *McLeod's Grammar*

iii) *Stapley's Exercises*

Bengali: iv) *Sitā*

v) *Kabigāthā*

vi) *Sāhitya Prabesh Grammar*

Mathematics: vii) Arithmetic

viii) *Subhankari*

ix) Simple Measurements

x) Geometry

History: xi) Brief History of India (topic)

xii) *Study of Geography* by Shashibabu

xiii) *Natural Geography* by Jogeshbabu

Science: xiv) Simple Physics

xv) *Ways of Health* by Cunningham

xvi) *Preserving Health* by Radhikababu

Third Standard

(age: 10 years)

English: i) *Longman's New Readers[sic] No. 3*

ii) *Arithmetical Primer No. 2*

History: iii) History of Bible (topic)

iv) *Stories from English History No. 1*

Geography: v) *Geographical Primer No. 2*

Class Five

(age: 11 years)

English: i) *Lethbridge's Easy selection [sic]*

ii) *McLeod's Child's Grammar*

iii) *Stapley's Exercises*

Bengali: iv) *Prabandhakusum*

v) *Sabhabashtak*

vi) *Sāhityaprabesh Grammar*

vii) *Rachanā Shopan*

Mathematics: viii) Arithmetic

ix) *Subhankari*

x) Geometry

xi) Measurements

History: xii) Brief History of England (topic)

xiii) Brief History of India

Geography: xiv) *Bhugal Prakash*

xv) Particular Description of India

xvi) Natural Geography

Science: xvii) Simple Natural Philosophy

xviii) Healthcare (topic)

xix) *Ways of Health*

Fourth Standard

(age: 11 years)

English: i) *Longman's New Readers* [sic] No. 4

ii) Dictionary for conjugation

iii) Arithmetic for beginners

History: iv) History of Bible

v) *Stories from English History* No. 2

Geography: vi) *First Geography*

The study of Bengali comes to an end over here, so it is not necessary to go beyond this. In the English-medium schools, English is treated as the mother tongue- studying of other languages is not needed there, so for the sake of comparison, the English books must be deleted from the list of books in the Bengali-medium schools. Even after doing so, the reader would note what a perverse burden has been loaded onto the shoulders of the Bengali child. However, the authorities of the Education Department are so affectionately concerned about their health that they have satisfied themselves only after enforcing upon the students three books by three writers on the topic of health. I entreat the writers of Bengali textbooks that none of them write one more book on the topic of health; rather, the parents of the students pay them every year an estimated sum as the price of the unwritten books; that might save the expense of going to a doctor.

Those who have the slightest knowledge about the extreme poverty of students in small towns would be able to understand what a heartless and inconsiderate cruelty it is to torture

students with such unnecessary mountains of texts. So many students have to starve and beg in order to procure textbooks. It would be contribution to the welfare of the country if one can smoothen the road for those who are thus obligated to acquire knowledge from foreign mines at the expense of starvation, exile and severe exertion. By grinding to smithereens the mind and body of the Bengali boy at the grindstone of education at a young age, an age of premature, elderly darkness- a Kali-yuga⁶- devoid of laughter, games and health, has dawned upon the whole of Bengal. Diseases within the country, foreign education, poverty at home and slavery of the other- all of these are together sucking our short-lived lives dry. On top of that if the Indian members of the Board of Studies- by the ill fortune of the Bengali people- inconsiderately keep heaping the burden of all kinds of dry learning emerging from the Heyer Press on the shoulders of the Bengali boy, then it has to be accepted that dark days have dawned upon the country.

Many schools with Scholarship Examinations have adopted the book by Mahendrababu for the teaching of physics, which leads to the learning of the boys remaining as before and leaves behind not much of matter in the bodies of the boys. My body trembles when I consider that the mentioned book has had nineteen editions up to three years ago and when I imagine that at least eighteen thousand boys have had to writhe and choke on the stony steps of this text like a fish lifted from water. In those dangerous terrains where since ancient times robbers have murdered helpless travellers- the way the heart grows desperate at the sight of those skeleton-strewn, wide and dangerous expanses, a similar kind of piteous feeling arrives in the mind at the sight of the nineteenth edition of that physics text.

Nobody is unaware of the kind of teachers appointed in the poor schools of the small towns and the instruments available there for a lucid understanding of science. Given to such circumstances, those who have determined the physics text of the honourable and greatly-educated Mahendranathbabu as the textbook for the examinees of the Scholarship Examination are prepared to murder hordes of faultless children. There are various things in this world that are difficult to

⁶ According to Hindu mythology, the entire expanse of human time is divided into four progressively deteriorating ages or *yugas*: Satya-yuga, Tretā-yuga, Dwāpar-yuga and lastly, Kali-yuga. Of these the last is deemed to be the darkest, full of evil and falsehood.

understand. For instance, what was the purpose of hanging a delicious fruit like the coconut at the top of a branchless tree fifty feet overhead; what was the intent of hiding a brilliant gem like the diamond deep within the difficult and dark caverns of a mine; why is such labour-intensive farming needed for crops like rice, wheat, barley; and what good do thorny bushes and brambles do to the world by growing so abundantly without any effort of cultivation; what purpose does the plentiful snow serve in the isolated wintry lands of the Himalayas whereas in Calcutta, in the terribly hot months of summer, why does the supply of ice cease; what is the result of a brainwave when the thief has already run away; why does the reply to a joke come to mind the next day after returning home;

And what was the reason for the introduction of the physics textbook written by the honourable and greatly-educated Mahendranathbabu?

All the above-mentioned issues are difficult to understand but the language and the composition of that physics textbook is far more difficult than these mysteries.

How cruel this textbook is for teachers and students can easily be understood by any sympathetic person who reads a few pages of that book. I do not know whether many of the students have parents but there is no doubt that the Department of Education is not their mother or father.

There are various means of delivering lucid learning of science to boys in England; in spite of that, for the learners being introduced to English for the first time, the scientific first readers edited by Mr. Huxley are astoundingly simple. They contain no trace of the complexity of the forest of science or non-navigability of language. That is because their main purpose is to teach science to students. The difficulty and methods of use of language may be necessary in texts where the mainstay is the learning of language- but the science that is easily so complex for the students of our country should have a language and composition as simple as possible or else it is unjust and cruel waste of the mental faculties of the students. And in the middle of it all, they learn their lessons by heart without understanding, as a result learning neither language nor science, only hampering education by rendering the mind tired, the time wasted and the body weary.

In order to prevent this unjust waste of the physical and mental faculties of our students, I request that the subjects be taught in Bengali in the Entrance schools. With this method, it is

doubtless that the time and effort saved could be put to the use of learning English, thereby acquiring a better knowledge of the stated language, and alongside would be able to help them understand the other subjects too in an easier and fuller manner. Their bodies would become comparatively healthier and the working of the intellect too would be relatively easier and natural.

BENGALI EDUCATION FOR THE MUSLIM STUDENT¹

Last year, in the Muslim Education Conference, the renowned zamindar, respected Saiyyid Nababali Choudhuri had read out an Urdu essay on the topic of Bengali education- that very essay has come to us for review.

The textbooks in use in Bengali medium schools are produced particularly bearing in mind their suitability for Hindu students but within Bengal, there are many regions where the Muslim population far exceeds the Hindu one; Saiyyid Saheb has expressed regret for this. Undoubtedly the topic merits discussion and we are sympathetic towards the respected speaker.

The primary reason for such occurrence is that up till now, the number of Hindu students was the majority in the school and Muslim writers had not proceeded toward the writing of wholly Bengali literature.

But gradually the number of Muslim students is increasing and there is no dearth of Muslim writers who can properly write in Bengali. So the time is ripe for composing textbooks with a particular eye on the Muslim students.

No one would disavow the fact that the good instructions of his own faith and the fair instances of his own religion are truly essential for the Muslim boy. Moreover, we opine that introduction to the Muslim shastras and high examples should be a mandatory part of the education of the Hindu boys.

Since Hindus and Muslims are intimate neighbours in Bengal - tied up in various ways with each other's joy and sorrow - if one's house catches fire the other has to run looking for water - it is imperative that right from childhood they grow fully familiar with every matter involving each other. If the Bengali Hindu boy does not know the shastras and history of his Muslim neighbour in an unadulterated manner and if the Muslim boy does not have the similar knowledge about his Hindu neighbour's scriptures and history, then with that incomplete education, neither of them would be able to fulfil their duties in life properly.

¹ “*Musalaman Chhattreer Bangla Shiksha*” (This essay was first published in the journal *Bharati* in October 1900)

Hence what Saiyyid Saheb had said with respect to the education of the Bengali Muslim boy, we reiterate with an eye towards the education of the Bengali Hindu boy - that is, it is unjust and unsuitable that there be no mention of his own countryman and closest neighbour, the Muslims, in the textbook of the Hindu boy of the Bengali- medium school.

The way English education has been made customary, we are not even slightly unaware of the history, sociology and customs of the English; however, they are people of a distant land and Muslims are our own countrymen and we have had interface with the customs, clothes, language and art of the Muslims since a long time. So today, if under the influence of the new English education, there arises a barrier between the relatives, the neighbours, then it would be a cause for great sorrow. There are ties of blood between the Bengali Muslim and the Bengali Hindu - we should never be oblivious of this fact.

There is a proverb in Bengali- “Beat the daughter to teach the daughter-in-law.” It is tolerable to rain a few blows on the daughter since she is one’s own but it is not always safe to raise a hand on the daughter-in-law.² Saiyyid Saheb has followed that idiom while upbraiding the Bengali textbooks; perhaps his inherent target was the English textbooks. From where has the Bengali book acquired the distorted descriptions of Muslim shastras and history? That the religious propaganda of Islam has to be done with weapon in hand is an injunction of the Muslim shastras - if this be not truth then from whom did we learn this lie since childhood? Whatever the English writer is writing about the rules of religion and the accounts of Hindus and Muslims, are the Hindu and Muslim students not memorising those indiscriminately? And is the Bengali textbook not just a reflection of it?

It is difficult to entirely avoid religious bias. In European history, many events and numerous characters are described in one way by a Protestant writer and in the opposite way by a Roman Catholic writer. In Europe, at many places, the schools of these two sects are separate, thereby the students are not obligated to learn oppositional things about their own sect. But it is mandatory for us to accept all kinds of personal and communal conventions of the English writer and if any book is written against those conventions then there is no chance of it being introduced in any school. The ideal opinion of the Bengali- medium school follows that of the English writer - the

² Tagore has adopted a tongue-in-the-cheek tone while explaining this popular Bengali proverb; needless to say, he does not advocate raising a hand on either one’s daughter or daughter-in-law.

examination papers have to be written in accordance with that or else the examination marks would reflect that all the education has been in vain.

Many modern Bengali historians are trying to free the history of Muslim rule from the slander cast upon it by the English pen. Akshaybabu, in his *Sirajcharita*,³ has succeeded in nearly disproving the “Black Hole Tragedy” but irrespective of how flimsy or trivial the proof be, the boy desirous of doing well in the examination is obligated to accept the Black Hole Tragedy as unquestionable truth.

So the respected speaker has to consider that we are firmly shackled where the opinion of the textbooks is concerned. Till we can endanger the superstitions of the current historians through freedom of research and logical opinion, our complaints would not be paid heed to. We call upon Hindu and Muslim writers to take the vow of reforming history. A couple of Hindu writers like the respected Kaliprasanna Bandyopadhyay are engaged in this complex endeavour but since almost all the historical resources are entangled in the Parsi Urdu language,⁴ assistance from Muslim writers is truly essential.

The ingredients of hatred towards Muslims that Saiyyid Saheb has collected from Bengali literature are considered to be unnecessary and unjust by us. It is saddening to come by instances of hatred towards Muslims in books by a writer like Bankimchandra but it is impossible to rid literature entirely of personal notions. The hatred towards the French can be noted at every step of Thackeray’s books but the French who are fond of English Literature cannot banish Thackeray’s books. The disinclination of the English towards the Irish becomes evident in the writing of many good English writers. All these are issues of debate and critique. That which is deserving of

³ Akshay Kumar Datta was a well-known writer, social reformer and activist of the Adi Brahma Samaj. He was also the editor of *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, the literary mouthpiece of the *Tattwabodhini Sabha* that was founded in 1839 by Debendranath Tagore. In his *Sirajcharita*, he analysed the character of Siraj-ud-Daulah, the last independent Nawab of Bengal, who was accused of confining 63 (contemporary record stated 143) Britishers in a small dungeon leading to the death of 43 (123 according to contemporary records) from suffocation and heat exhaustion.

⁴ Tagore, here, does not refer to the Zoroastrian community but Persian as a language that has intimate link with Urdu that developed in India. The expression “Parsi Urdu” can be interpreted as Urdu language heavily laced with Persian linguistic influence.

reproach in the writing of Bankimchandra should be done by critics but it is impossible to safeguard any literature from being reproached. When good Muslim writers engage more in writing Bengali literature, we cannot hope that none of them would cause discontent of any manner in Hindu readers.

SANTINIKETAN BRAHMACHARYASHRAM¹

Foundation Day Sermon

O noble humans, a long time ago this country of ours, this India, was truly great in all matters—the people here were brave: they are our ancestors.

What is the significance of true greatness? When did our ancestors consider themselves great? In these days, we no longer possess that great sensibility of theirs and thus we feel that wealth is the path to greatness—we call a wealthy man great. But they did not do so. The greatest among them, the Brahmins considered wealth to be trivial. They had no luxuries either in possessions or in appearance. But mighty kings came to bow down before them.

So do think about a man who considers himself great by the dint of his clothes, shoes and other accessories—how meagre he actually is. Can a pair of shoes render someone great? Do expensive shoes or clothes testify to any virtue of ours? Those sages of our ancient times who had no shoes on their feet, no clothes on their backs, were they not far superior to us who don foreign tailored clothes and foreign shoes? If that great Yajnavalkya of ours, that great Rishi Vashishtha come and stand in our midst with their bare feet, weight of matted hair and the light in their eyes, is there any king or sahib today great enough who would not cast off his crown and throw away his shoes in order to bend down and touch the dust of the feet of that poor Brahmin? Is there anyone who would be able to stand holding his head high by the dint of his cars, mansions and gold necklaces?

They were our forefathers—we bow down to those honourable Brahmins. We bow not just by lowering our heads but by imbibing their teaching and following their example. To strive to be like them is to honour them truly.

They grew to greatness by their virtues. They regarded truth as the highest of all—they never bowed their heads to falsehood. They engaged in lifelong severe *tapasyā* or asceticism in order to discover truth—it was not their aim to fritter away their lives in pursuit of pleasure. Anything that hindered their path to discover truth was easily discarded by them. In their heart

¹ Brahmacharyashram was the name of the school that Tagore had founded at Santiniketan. It was called so as it was inspired by the Vedic ideal of brahmacharya and Tagore sought to emulate the ashram of a Vedic guru through his school. The school was also known as Brahmavidyalaya.

they strove tirelessly to know truth, they spoke truth and bided by what they knew to be truth and for that they were afraid of none. The way we work tirelessly for the sake of money and clothes and other possessions—they used to bear far greater hardships for the sake of acquiring truth. Thus they were far greater than us.

They were fearless—they feared nothing other than dharma. They had such strength in their hearts, such ever-present joy that they did not tolerate misrule by any king or emperor – even death did not scare them. They knew it well that no one can rob them of anything-- they suffered no harm by the loss of clothes and property. All they had was within their minds. The truth that they had the knowledge of could not be robbed by any king or dacoit. They were certain that death was nothing to fear. Death causes only the body to perish but what lies within is never lost.

They thought about the good and welfare of all beings and reflected upon what would lead to the well-being of all and acted upon it. Everyone came to them to know how they should act. Householders went to them to know what would lead to the good of their houses while kings went to consult them about the general welfare of their subjects. They discarded all comforts, pleasures and luxuries in order to contemplate the good of the world.

But were there then only Brahmins and Rishis No, it was not so. Kings were there as were their armies. They had to fight wars for the sake of their kingdoms. But they did not forget dharma even in midst of war. They did not strike the unarmed or kill anyone who sought their shelter; the one on a chariot did not hit the one below. Wars were fought between armies—they did not destroy the houses of the innocent subjects of their enemy. When a king's son came of age, the king would bestow his wealth and kingdom upon his son and leave for the forest in order to meditate upon truth and God with all his heart. They would then no longer possess their jewels and diamonds, earthly possessions and followers around them. The almighty king would leave behind all and go forth like a poor soul with a beggar's bowl in his hand. They knew that the kingdom and wealth are all superficial--man's greatness did not depend on it—the way to greatness lies within. But it was the duty of the king to rule according to the law of dharma, so if required, they even laid down

their lives for it—but once the crown prince grew up and their responsibilities came to an end, they no longer stayed behind holding on to power.²

The same rule applied to householders. When the eldest son grew up, they bestowed all the responsibilities of the family on him and left to follow the life of poverty and asceticism. As long as they lived within the family, they worked devotedly for the sake of the family. They forgot none, be it relatives, neighbours, guests, poor or orphan—they tried to serve them wholeheartedly and selflessly—but once the time was up, they no longer cast a backward glance.

The ones who engaged in trade also needed to follow the path of dharma and truth. To cheat someone, to charge interest unlawfully, to hoard all the wealth like a miser for one's own self—this was beyond them.

The Brahmins thought about the rulers, the traders and the workmen alike. Their aim was to maintain dharma, truth and discipline in society. So everyone could follow their advice and example. For that reason alone was there such progress and development in the entire society.

The Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas of yesteryears followed a vow of greatness and bravery and I have called you to this solitary ashram in order to take that vow and imbibe that learning. You have come to me—I will bear in mind the truth spoken by those ancient rishis and their enlightened examples and strive to channel you to their path—may God, the lord of our vow, grant me the strength and ability to do so. If you succeed in this attempt, all of you would grow into brave men—you would not cower before fear, despair at suffering, sadden at loss or be vain in wealth; you would not be bothered by death, you would seek to know truth, discard falsehood from your heart, actions and words, and stay away from all evil action with the knowledge in your glad hearts that God is omniscient both within and without. Dedicate yourselves wholeheartedly to your duties, strive for the progress of society through the path of dharma but when time comes to leave behind all wealth and family, do not be distressed. If you do so, India would once again be enlightened by you—good would follow where you are and you would do good to all and everyone would be benefited through you.

² Tagore's representation of ancient India, over, here, is a highly idealized one. Perhaps the reason of this idealism and simplification is the age of his target audience. Tagore was delivering this sermon to the young students of his school with the view of impressing upon them the lofty ideal that the school was aspiring to.

What kind of education and vow did our ancestors follow? In their childhood, they left their homes for the solitary dwelling of their teacher. There they would need to abstain themselves by following very strict regulations. They would devote themselves sincerely to their teacher and serve him in every way. From chopping wood, fetching water, grazing his cattle to bringing alms for him from a village—these were their tasks irrespective of how rich one's father was. They were required to maintain absolute purity of their bodies and minds – no evil touched their bodies or minds. They wore saffron clothes, slept on a hard bed, went barefooted and had no umbrella to shield their heads—there was no affluence in dressing or lifestyle. All the efforts of the entire mind were concentrated only upon acquiring education, searching for truth, only upon suppressing one's ill intents and trying to focus upon cultivating one's virtues.

You people too would need to bear such hardships and follow a life of strict rules and live in this *gurugriha* or teacher's home by discarding all luxuries. Respect your teacher in every way and do not disregard him in the slightest in your hearts, words or actions. Keep your bodies pure—let no evil touch them. Surrender your minds entirely to the instruction of your teacher.

From today onwards you have vowed to follow the path of truth. Abjure falsehood from your body, mind and words. First you must submissively devote your mind, intellect and effort to the quest for truth and afterwards, when you realize truth, act upon it and propagate it strongly and fearlessly.

From today onwards you are vowed to the path of fearlessness. Other than dharma, you have nothing to fear in the world. Neither danger, nor death nor suffering—nothing should cause fear in you. Always, be it day or night, with a glad heart and happy countenance and with respect, be engaged in acquiring truth and dharma.

From today onwards you are vowed to the path of purity. All that is impure and unclean, all that makes you feel shame to bring forth—cast that away with wholehearted effort from your bodies and minds and bloom with pure dharma like the bedewed early-morning blossoms.

From today onwards you are vowed on the path of welfare. That which decides the good of each other is your duty. Discard your self-interest and self-pleasure for that.

To put it briefly, from today onwards you are vowed to the path of Brahma.³ The one Brahma is omnipresent both within and without you. You cannot hide anything from Him.⁴ He is silently watching you from within yourselves. Wherever you are, lying down or sitting, you are within Him and moving within Him. You bear His touch in your entire body—He is privy to all you think. He is the only one to fear and He is the only one who destroys fear.

Every day think about him at least once. Our Vedas contain the mantra to contemplate him. This mantra was uttered daily by our Rishis as they stood before the Almighty. O noble humans, join me in uttering that mantra:

*oṃ bhūr bhuvah svaḥ tat saviturvareṇyam
bhargo devasya dhīmahi dhiyo yo naḥ pracodayāt⁵*

Primary Working Principles

Respected Sir,⁶

That you have advanced to take as a vow the responsibility I have bestowed upon you, has extremely gladdened me. I sincerely wish that God may grant you the strength and devotion to carry out this vow.

I have already stated to you that the period of education for the boys is one of maintaining a vow. To gain human sensibility is not selfishness, rather it is the ultimate aim—this was known to our ancestors. The foundation to the acquiring of this education, human sensibility, is the education which they referred to as the vow of Brahmacharya. This involves not only the

³ Tagore, here, is referring to the Upanishadic concept of Brahma (not to be confused with the Hindu god Brahma) which denotes the spirit of divinity immanent within entire creation.

⁴ The divine spirit is not gendered as per the Upanishad. Tagore, as a follower of the Brahmo faith, was a worshipper of “*nirakar* Brahma” or the “formless Brahma” who had neither any physical form nor any gender.

⁵ This is the Gayatri Mantra. The meaning of this mantra can be briefly understood as - We meditate on that most adored Supreme Lord, the creator, whose effulgence (divine light) illumines all realms (physical, mental and spiritual). May this divine light illumine our intellect.

⁶ This letter is addressed to Kunjalal Ghosh whom Tagore had appointed as an administrator as well as a teacher of the Brahmacharyashram.

memorizing of lessons by heart and passing examinations—but with abstinence, with devotion and respect, with purity and absolute concentration, preparing oneself for the stage of family life and beyond that stage, for creating eternal bonds with Brahma, and this endeavour is the vow of Brahmacharya.

This is a vow of dharma. Many things of this world are commodities to be bought and sold but dharma is not a commodity. This had to be given by one side with innate goodwill and accepted by the other with submissive reverence. Thus education was not a commodity in ancient India. Nowadays one who teaches is simply a tutor but back then the ones who taught were true teachers or gurus. What they delivered with their teaching could not be repaid without the establishment of a spiritual connection between the student and the teacher.

To create such spiritual ties with the students is the primary goal of Santiniketan Brahmavidyalaya. But it is important to bear in mind that just as lofty goal would be, attaining it would be equally difficult. These actions cannot be simply ordered to happen. A tutor is easily got hold of but it is not easy to acquire a true teacher or guru. So one has to fix one's eyes on the goal and wait patiently for the opportunity. One has to accept the carrying out of as much welfare work as possible under a given circumstance and bearing in mind one's own shortcomings, strive to advance oneself on the path of regular development.

If one vows to the path of welfare, one has to prepare the mind for obstacles and disquiet—one has to bear numerous unfair attacks patiently. One has to win over all attacks of oppositional nature by the dint of tolerance, forgiveness and desire to do good.

I wish to cultivate a special sense of devotion and reverence for their country within the students of Brahmavidyalaya. As there is the specific presence of God in one's mother and father—similarly for us, there is the being of God within our country and the space of our ancestors' birth and education. Just as the parents are gods, so is the country. I want particular attention to be paid to preventing the students from learning to regard their country as trivial, laughable, despicable or inferior to other countries. We would never be able to succeed if we go against the very nature of our country. If we can fulfil our beings by imbibing the greatness that was there in our country, then only would we be able to truly ascend to universality—we would never achieve that by demolishing our individuality and merging ourselves with the other. So it is far better to be

excessively attached to following the customs of one's own land rather than blindly emulating foreigners.

Students vowed to the path of Brahmacharya need to practise hardships. They have to discard all luxuries and pride of wealth. I wish to eradicate the vanity of wealth entirely from the minds of the students. Wherever one can perceive any signs of the same, it would be essential to destroy it entirely. I feel the son of—has a weakness for fine objects—it would need to be suppressed. Luxuries of attire would need to be discarded. No one should regard poverty as shameful or despicable. All affinity to fine living must be eradicated.

Secondly comes devotion. It is mandatory to follow the rules relating to living, studying, playing, bathing, eating and maintaining all kinds of cleanliness and hygiene. No kind of uncleanness should be tolerated within or without, be it in bedding, clothes or one's person. Where any student lacks in number of clothes, he must himself wash his clothes daily with soap and scrub clean the pitcher he uses daily. And the part of the room where he stores his bedding, clothes and books must be maintained in impeccable order by him daily at a fixed hour. It would also be good if the students take turns in cleaning and arranging their teachers' rooms. It must be made mandatory for the students to serve the teachers.

Thirdly comes reverence. Students need to be indiscriminately reverent towards their teachers. Even if they are unjust, the students would need to bear it submissively without raising any objection. They would not be party to criticism or vilification of the teachers. If the teachers ever engage in criticizing each other they should take care not to do so in the presence of any student. Everyone needs to pay attention so that no teacher ever engages in demeaning behaviour, anger or intolerance towards other teachers in front of the students. Students should touch the feet of the teachers daily. Teachers should bow to and greet each other. Maintaining civility towards each other should be an ideal present before the students.

The attention of the students should be drawn at opportune moments towards self-control, devotion to rules, reverence to the elders and the discarding of luxury, as were the ideals of our country in ancient times.

Those who (whether student or teacher) wish to follow in exactitude the customs of Hindu society would be free to do so and it is against the rules of this school to hinder or ridicule them.

No one should be made to suffer by any practice adverse to Hindu customs in the kitchen or the dining place.

Daily prayers. Students are to be explained the significance of the Gayatri mantra and they are to memorize it. I am writing in brief below how I explain the Gayatri mantra:

om bhūr bhuvah svaḥ This section is famous as the *vyahrti* or utterance of Gayatri. To acquire from all sides is named as *vyahrti*. While meditating, initially one has to compile the sky, the earth that is, the entire universe, within one's mind—one has to feel then that one is standing in the midst of the universe—that I am no longer only the national of a particular country. One has to stand in the midst of the universe and meditate upon the One who is the creator of this universe and upon His honourable knowledge and strength. One has to feel that this unimaginably wide universe is emanating at this moment and at every moment from Him only. One has to think how am I ever related to this unlimited power of His that is manifest in this entire universe. With which reference should I meditate upon Him *dhiyo yo naḥ pracodayāt*—the One who has sent our faculties to us, we will meditate upon Him with the help of those very faculties. How do we directly know the light of the sun? Through the rays sent by the sun to us. Similarly the Sun of the universe is continually sending our intellect to us and owing to the presence of that very intellect, we are realizing our own selves and the world without – this strength of intellect is His strength and only through that strength can we directly and most intimately feel His strength. As we realize His presence in the external world as the Sun of the universe, may we also continually realize Him as the constant sender of our intellect within our souls. That the world without and our intellect within us, both are the manifestations of the same power—should we know this, we would feel this intimate connection between our consciousness and the world, between our consciousness and the Eternal One and thus be freed from the narrowness of self-interest, fear and despair. The Gayatri manta establishes the connection between the external and the internal and between the internal and the most intimate—that is why this mantra is so glorious

*yo devo'gnau yo'psu yo viśvam bhuvanamāviveśa
ya oṣadhīṣu yo vanaspatiṣu tasmai devāya namo namaḥ*

I consider this mantra to be the simplest for the boys to acquire the understanding of Brahma. By feeling that God resides everywhere, be it in water or land, fire or trees, it would be easy indeed to bow down before him amidst the fields stretching to the horizon in Santiniketan. The pure light,

sky and fields over there are filled with the Lord of creation and it would not be difficult for the boys to revere Him if they bear this in mind. So alongside the Gayatri, the boys should learn this mantra as well. They can use this mantra even before fully understanding the Gayatri.

Students, before starting their lessons, are to recite in unison, “*Om pita no'si*” and bow their heads. That God is our father and He is educating us in ethics and knowledge like a father, is something the students must daily remind themselves of. Teachers are simply a medium but the true knowledge is something we get from the Universal Father. In order to acquire it one has to free the mind of all kinds of evil and ill, to have that knowledge one has to bow down with reverence to God every day—thus that mantra contains

Om viśvāni deva savitarduritāni parāsuva

yad bhadraṃ tanna ā suva

“O God, o Father, cleanse us of all evil, send to us that which is noble.”

For the ones on the path of Brahmacharya, this is the best mantra to cleanse oneself, on every day of one's life, from all kinds of physical and mental ills, and to acquire the sense of humanity—

yad bhadraṃ tanna ā suva

Frequently the mind is distracted while lecturing. I do not think that sentimentality has a great value in spirituality. The practice of entering a sentimental state is as weakening to the mind as that of using a narcotic. Nothing parallels the deeply philosophical, brief ancient mantras in aiding meditation. The further one advances on the path of endeavour, these mantras penetrate into the mind with equal depth—they never posit any hindrance. That is the reason why I initiate the students into these mantras of the Upanishads. In order to prevent the mantras from becoming merely memorized words, I, from time to time, remind them of the mantras by explaining their significance to them. For some time, owing to my absence, I have not had the chance to explain the mantras to the new students. It would be good if you explain the significance of some mantra from the Upanishads for daily prayers to the students you take along with you.

Now let me enumerate your working process.

A committee would be set up with Manoranjan Bandyopadhyay, Jagadananda Ray and Subodhchandra Majumdar. Manoranjanbabu would be the president of the committee. You will carry out the work of the school according to the instructions of that committee.

Set specific times for the students to rise from their beds, bathe, pray, eat, study, play and go to bed—do what is necessary in order to maintain those rules.

According to the advice of the committee, you have to appoint the servants of the school, decide upon their salaries and leaves.

Take approval for an approximate budget for the coming month at the end of every month from the committee. If you need to spend more than the budget, take written approval from the committee.

Take their signatures daily in the register. Submit the accounts of a week at the end of the week and that of a month at the month's end to me with their signatures.

If the committee proposes any modification of any rule, write it down and let me know.

Once the boys' games end in the evening, convey your opinions to the committee and take their signatures in the register.

You are entrusted with the treasury. All objects and books would remain under you. Take signatures of the committee in the asset register. If anything is broken, lost or acquired, keep a note of that along with signatures of the committee.

Be present during mealtimes and watch over the meals of the students.

Keep a vigilant eye always over the health of the students.

Pay attention to the neatness of their belongings, and the cleanliness and hygiene of their persons and clothes.

If you note anything suspicious about the character of any student, inform the committee and correct it at the very onset.

You have to supervise so that there is nothing unclean within or without the school, in the kitchen or the surrounding area and the toilets.

Keep an eye over the cattle in the cowshed and their feed and servants.

You are in charge of the flower and vegetable gardens attached to the school. You can buy seeds and fertilizers and appoint workers for that with the approval of the committee.

It is not desirable that there be any connections between the Santiniketan Ashram and the school.⁷ The gardeners of the Ashram might be needed sometimes for help in shopping or gardening—but it would be better not to have connections with other servants.

If workers are needed, contact the chief of the gardeners, Rabindra Singha, or his assistant to arrange for them.

If patients come to Santiniketan for medicines, give them homeopathy medicines. If you give me a list of the required medicines, I will arrange for their procurement.

Let me know if anyone related to the Santiniketan Ashram interferes with the school or is displeased at its servants.

Pay special attention to the meals and all kinds of convenience for the Japanese student Hori.

Without permission from Manoranjanbabu, the guests in Santiniketan would not be permitted to visit the school or be present during teaching hours. You have to convey this message to them with as much politeness as you can.

Without permission from the guardians, do not permit any student to go out of the school.

Do not allow people from outside to mingle with the students.

If the teachers are displeased with the behaviour of servants, they should let you know—after informing the committee, you have to take the necessary steps.

⁷ By the use of the word “Ashram”, Tagore is referring to the pre-existing Santiniketan house that was built by his father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore to serve as a spiritual retreat for the members of the Brahmo faith. It is not to be confused with Tagore’s school named Brahmacharyashram or Brahmavidyalaya.

If the teachers are dissatisfied with the food, rather than discussing it in front of the students or servants, they should convey it to you and you should raise their complaints in front of the committee.

Make arrangements for students to write postcards to their parents on specifically appointed days. Students from junior classes are prohibited from sending letters in closed envelopes.

Attempts have to be made, by keeping record of all the expenses for postcards, books, paper, pens etc., to procure the cost from the parents by writing to them.

Whatever the committee deems fit for the parents to know, convey the same to them in writing.

If any particular student is in need of particular dietary arrangements, make arrangements for him with consent from the committee.

If any student is sent any particular food item from his parents, no one should be allowed to consume it himself without sharing it with other students.

For your knowledge, I state that if there is any excess milk from the cowshed left after fulfilling the need of the students, then the teachers are to have it.

If any guest in the Santiniketan Ashram borrows a book for reading, it has to be recovered back from him in due time.

Nobody should be permitted to take books back to Calcutta. If a special need arises then special permission has to be sought from me.

Take a count of the plates, saucers and other utensils once a month.

If the parents of students arrive, with the permission of Manoranjanbabu, arrange for meeting the students at a specific time.

For the present, I am stating these rules. Slowly, as per requirement, these would be modified and changed a lot.

But I do not have much faith in running the school chiefly on the basis of rules. That is because the school in Santiniketan is not a machine for making students memorize their lessons. Its purpose would not be fulfilled without the help of a spontaneous desire for welfare.

I do not consider the teachers of the school to be my subordinates. That they would fulfil their duties with the help of their free will and desire to do good is my hope and I always wait for the same. I do not wish to externally coerce them towards a pure task by dint of the power of artificial discipline. I know them as my friends and co-workers. As the work of the school is mine, so it is theirs—if it not be so then the establishment of this school is in vain.

The thoughts that have inspired me to devote myself to the work of this school at the cost of my literary and financial loss and physical and mental hardships—I do not expect the same thoughts to be present in others. Not long ago, I did not expect it even from myself. But after much reflection, I have clearly understood that the vow of Brahmacharya in childhood, that is, self-control, purity of mind and body, concentration, reverence of the guru and endeavour to acquire knowledge, as precious as wealth, from the guru with devotion and respect and with the awareness that education is the path to acquiring humanity—this is the path for India and the only way of saving India.

But if I am unable to convey this idea and interest to another's heart then that is my inability and ill fortune—I cannot blame another for it. One cannot impose one's thoughts on others—and in this matter, hypocrisy and pretension are the worst.

As a thought has appeared holistically within me, I can clearly perceive my ideal in spite of all the shortcomings and incompleteness—I can realize the future within the present, the tree within the seed—so despite all fragmentariness and lack, the gap between the action and the conception, my interest and hopes do not dwindle. One who sees my work in fragments of the daily present, in the context of various obstacles and lack, might not keep his interest and hopes alive. That is why I do not demand much from anyone, I do not attempt to forcefully excite another with my purpose—with full patience I depend upon time, truth and the Creator. Slowly and naturally, that which is born from within through the exercise of an invisible power is fruitful and one can depend only upon it. One cannot fully depend on that which is born out of constant external excitement, some shame, some sentiment and some imitation and many a time, it has various ill effects.

I am hoping that the teachers, not through my discipline, but through the natural development of the seed of well-wishing within them would harmonize their own lives with the Brahmacharyashram with pleasure and interest. As they would daily accept the service and reverence of the students, at the same time they would develop themselves to be truly deserving of the students' reverence by dint of their self-sacrifice and self-control. Partiality, injustice, impatience, sudden anger at a small issue, egoism, displeasure, trivialities with students and servants, lack of seriousness, small frailties of habit—all these should be discarded by them with extreme care daily. If they themselves do not practise renunciation and self-control, then all their preaching to the students would be futile—and the light of the Brahmacharyashram would be dimmed. Students should not learn to pay respect on the outside but disregard from within.

I wish that an example be set up in the school through Rathi⁸ where work like service to the teacher and hospitality to the guests are concerned. There is true honour in these works and no dishonour—this truth should be imprinted upon the hearts of the students. Everyone should come forth with interest and take part in these services. All students must be made to practise greeting the guests, speaking politely with them and behaving courteously towards them. If any stranger comes to the school, they should learn to ask him questions politely—the students should not demean the servants and if they fall ill, the students must ask after them. If any student falls ill, students should be bestowed with the responsibility of administering medicine and food and taking any other care. It is necessary to pay attention that the servants are made to work as little as possible. If you consider it fitting and convenient, then the responsibility of taking care of the cows in the cowshed can be laid on the students to some extent. There are two deer; it would be good if the students can themselves feed them and tame them. I wish that a few birds, fishes and small animals be housed in the ashram and the students be made responsible for their care. It is better not to put the birds in cages but tame them patiently in the open by feeding them daily etc. Some pigeons have taken shelter in Santiniketan; if the students try they can tame them and the squirrels. Know that the responsibility of arranging the library, maintaining order in the rooms and taking care of the garden should be laid only on the students.

⁸ “Rathi” refers to Tagore’s eldest son Rathindranath Tagore who was, then, a student of Brahmacharyashram.

Put the responsibility of caring for the Japanese student Hori on some particular student like Rathi. If owing to the demands on his time due to the Entrance examination, he cannot make time, then put it on some other student or make older students take turns for it. They should serve food to Hori themselves at the appointed hour. They should make his bed in the morning—enquire after him—check if the servants have provided water for him to bathe. If Rathi is made to do these things for the initial one or two days, then the other students would not hesitate to do the same.

It would be good if students take turns in serving food at mealtimes. There might be objections if the server is not Brahmin. So for that requisite arrangements should be made.

It would be good if the students picnic on Sundays and cook for themselves.

At present I am in the midst of many troubles and so I could not think in detail or write everything down. Once you join duty there, many things would occur to your mind. Then you can discuss them with the teachers and let me know your opinions.

I do not have any orders or instructions for you; through empathy, respect and affection you will be able to feel my thoughts and freely submit to your duties by the virtue of your own desire to do good. And

Yadyat karma prakurvīta tad brahmaṇi samarpayet⁹

November 11, 1902

Yours,

Rabindranath Tagore.

⁹ I give up the fruits of my action to God.

PRIMARY EDUCATION¹

It is known to all that a proposal has come to introduce, in the primary education textbooks of Bengal, four types of rural dialects in accordance with the northern, southern, eastern and western parts of Bengal.²

All that has to be said about it has already been spoken about in various ways in the press; but the anxiety of the country remains to be appeased. To expect that, because there lies logic on our side victory too would fall on our side, is difficult.

We have seen that if we express a united refusal to any proposal raised by the government, the government seems to become more adamant at negating that proposal.

There are multiple reasons for this. First, that which we regard as injurious, if for some reason that very thing is beneficial for the principles of governance, then the reasons forwarded by our side would only strengthen their resolve.

Second, the government fears that if they give up on any resolution for our sake, it would harm their sovereignty over the subjects.

Third, if there occurs an attempt to defeat the dominant side in a debate then the extent of its self-oblivion, is something proven to us quite recently.

Thus, it cannot be claimed that because we have raised a united objection, the scenario would be a hopeful one for us.

¹ “*Primary Shiksha*”, first published in the journal *Bhandar* in its April 1905 issue. The date of its publication is of particular significance as it shows that the essay was written in the days leading to the *Bangabhanga Andolan* or the Partition of Bengal (1905). Tagore refers to the adamancy of the authority even at the face of logical arguments. He also writes about the government’s refusal to give up any of its resolutions. These are clear indications of the political climate of the time that was one of Indians striving to stop the Partition from happening. The decision of the Partition was announced on July 19, 1905 and implemented on October 16, 1905. It resulted in a mass movement to overthrow the partition and Tagore was one of the prominent leaders of that movement.

² Tagore, here, is referring to a proposal placed before National Council of Education.

I cannot even claim that it would have been a cause for hope had we not objected. It is difficult to determine which is the right direction for the hapless.

In spite of that, I do not feel that there would be reason to fear if the proposal of the committee is translated into action. That much can be our consolation.

If you think about it—why does a farmer’s son attend primary school? It is not as if he goes there to learn properly about the process of farming. The farmer would laugh it away if it is said that the teacher can render his son into a master of agriculture.

Thereafter his son would become a doctor, a lawyer or a clerk by attending primary school. If he wishes to study for a scholarship after attaining primary education, then he would again have to learn the formal language instead of the dialects.

Anyway, the reason why the farmer sends his son to the primary school is because his sole purpose is that his son remains not a mere farmer but one who is somewhat suited to the ways of civilized society; so that he would be able to read and write letters, advocate for himself in a civil manner in the court of the zamindar, be able to give leadership to his village, and people from the civilized class would comment, “Indeed, your son is rather polished in his ways!”

Once the farmer attains some degree of prosperity, he immediately has the natural wish of moving towards the boundaries of civilized society. Even the wish that his son would one day eschew the plough for the privileged life of the babus starts to germinate in his mind. For the sake of that, at the cost of his own time and despite his own loss, he sends his son to school or sets up a school on his own yard.

But if the farmer is told that you are to send your son to the school for farmers and not to the school for gentlemen, then there would remain no cause for his enthusiasm. In such a situation, his purpose for sending his son to school would be a futile one.

Not only so—the school for farmers within the village would become an object of shame for the farmers. The arrangement that seeks to legally render permanent that agricultural life that the farmer wishes to supersede with the passage of time and good fortune, cannot find any favour with the farmer at least.

The way that medicine reminds one of something bitter and strong, similarly, with regard to education, the farmer thinks of something that is not related to his everyday existence. To him, therein lies the glory of education.

If after all his efforts, his son goes to school to learn the rural dialect and one or two things about his own trade, then he would obviously lose respect for that education.

It is true that the farmer cannot use the formal language but it is not that he is unfamiliar with it. By various means such as plays,³ songs and oral narratives, the formal language reaches his ears and he, too, while speaking with people from civilized society, tries his best to mingle this formal language with his own tongue.

When through a particular way of education, attempts would be made to render his son oblivious of the formal language, it is not as if the farmer would not recognize it and once he does recognize it, it is not as if he would be happy about it.

The farmer may not know what “observer, thinker and experimenter” means but he does know what “civilized and uncivilized” signifies. Thus, for the temptation of something he knows nothing of, he would happily forego what he does understand, the farmer is not that big a fool.

For all these reasons I am hoping that the rationality of the farmer would save him and the country from the hidden arrows of the Education Committee.

³ Tagore is referring to the open-air dramatic performances, common to rural Bengal, that were known as “*jatra*”.

PROBLEMS OF EDUCATION¹

Some of my respected friends in the National Education of Council had bestowed upon me the responsibility of creating a framework for the school section of this council.

When I sat down in order to carry out their request, I saw that the work was not easy. That is because at the onset it is necessary to know the fundamental causal factor behind the school, the thought that underpins it. I do not know that.

According to our shastras, desire is the cause of the flow of life- sudden occurrence of a cluster of things is not the reason for birth. If desire is cut off, then birth and death cease to exist due to the root having been demolished.

Similarly, it can be said that ideology lies at the root of every programme. Without ideology, there can be rules, money, committee but the root of the work is cleaved leading to it drying away.

So, at the very onset, the question arises as to what ideology has inspired the birth of the National Council of Education. In the current systems of education prevalent in the country, what ideology was lacking, rendering that education incomplete, and where is that ideology being placed in the proposed school?

Had the National Education Council been established only for the sake of founding a school of arts, then I would have understood that its purpose is the fulfilment of a particular narrow aim. But as it is being observed that the Council wishes to keep an eye over the education of the entire country, the question arises in the mind as to what ideology would fuel this work of education. The regulations and the syllabus are all superficial matters.

If someone replies that education would be given in a “national” manner, then the question would arise as to what comprise “national” ideology in the context of education. There is no

¹ “*Shiksha Shamashya*” (This essay was first published in the Bengali journal *Bangadarshan* in June 1906)

determined limit of the term “national” and it is very difficult to do so as well. What consists national and what does not is decided upon variously by various people depending on education, convenience and culture.

Thus, an understanding must be reached by the countrymen together regarding the fundamental ideology of the National Council of Education. That we have proceeded towards this work motivated by anger at the British Government is something we cannot think even for a moment. The psyche of the country felt the lack of something, a desire for something, that is why we have gathered to fulfil that hunger of the country and this is the truth.

We feel a want- but want for what in particular is not easy to determine. Our redemption depends upon the discovery of the truth relating to this. If we err, if owing to our lack of action, we consider that which is nearest to us, to which we are accustomed, as the truth, then the biggest of names would not be able to save us from failure.

So, while the founders of the National Council of Education are engaged in this attempt, a discussion should be held from the side of the common people of the country in order to understand one’s own mind and own lack.

To instigate that discussion is the principal target of this composition of mine. In this context, it is my duty to present, at the court of the country, the thought that is rising at the forefront of my mind. I know that it would not be accepted if it clashes with the prevalent culture of the educated society. If it is not accepted then there would be a convenience open to you all - you can summarily reject it by deeming all of it as the product of the high-flying imagination of a poet and I too would try to reassure myself by imagining a happy ending for my unaccepted proposal in that consolatory place of the failed poets, posterity, that is, some indeterminate future. But before that, today I humbly request you to afford me a large amount of patience and forgiveness.

That which we understand by the word “school” is a machine for delivering education. The teacher is a part of this factory. The factory opens with the ringing of the bell at ten-thirty. The machine starts working, the teacher’s mouth runs along as well. The factory closes at four, the teacher-machine too stops his mouth, students return home with two or three pages of machine-minted learning. Afterwards during examinations, this learning is evaluated and marked.

One convenience of a machine is that it is possible to obtain the perfect ordered goods with the perfect measurements - there is not much of a difference between objects produced by one machine and those produced by another; it becomes easy to mark.

But there is a lot of difference between one person and another. In fact, there can be differences in the performance of the same person from one day to another.

Still what one can get from a person, one cannot get the same from a machine. A machine can produce something in front of you but it cannot donate or give anything away - it can give oil but has no ability to light a lamp.

In Europe, man has grown up in the midst of human society, the school has helped somewhat in that. The learning that people receive over there is not disconnected from the people there- it is being practised at that very land and is growing evident every day through education, dialogue and action. The Human society had simply made arrangements to disperse to the boys through schools what it has acquired through various events and people, saved and enjoyed.

Thus, the school there is in harmony with the society, it is deriving its sustenance from the earth of society and is bearing fruits for society.

But where the school is not thus in sync with the society around, that which has been externally imposed upon society, is dry and lifeless. What we get from it is a product of pain and we cannot make much headway when we try to apply that learning. That we memorise from ten in morning to four in the afternoon, bears no resemblance to life, to the people around and to home. What parents, brothers and friends discuss at home has no connection with the education at school, rather, at times, is oppositional. In such circumstances, school becomes merely an engine - it produces objects, it does not create life.

For that reason, I say that if we make an identical superficial copy of the European school, it is not that we would get the exactly same thing. This imitation can produce the same benches, tables and working methodology, but that becomes a burden for us.

In the olden times when we received learning from the guru and not from the teacher, when we sought knowledge from human beings and not from machines, back then topics of our education were not as diverse and wide, and then there was no opposition between book-learning

and customs and ideas prevalent in society. If we try to bring back those days in exactitude, that too would be merely artificial, its external paraphernalia would become burdensome, it would have no use whatsoever.

So, if we properly understand our present requirement then we have to make such arrangement that the school can help the home; where the diversity of learning can be at one with the liveliness of teaching; where the school can shoulder both the responsibilities of delivering book-learning and moulding the heart and the mind. We have to pay attention so that the difference, even opposition, that exists between the school and the world around does not distract the mind of the students and so that the school learning does not become an indigestible, abstract and unrealistic matter occupying a few hours of a day.

If rooms are built in the school, it takes the shape of a boarding school. The picture that comes to the mind in context of this boarding school is not a pleasant one- it is classified at par with barracks, mental asylums, hospitals or prisons.

Thus we have to completely abandon the example of England because the history of England, the society of England are not ours. We have to properly understand what ideals have enamoured the hearts of our countrymen for years and what would gladden the heart of our country.

There are enough obstacles to this understanding. We have studied in English schools, wherever we look English examples are evident in front of us. It has obscured the history of our country and the heart of our own people. When we lift the national flag high and prepare ourselves to work freely, the English shackles belt us firmly and prevent us from deviating from the examples.

One difficulty of ours is that we do not get to see English learning and school alongside English society, that is, that learning and school in their proper place. We do not know how to harmonise them with a living society. That is why we do not know how to harmonise the Indian version of that school with our lives; however, such knowledge is most essential. It is not a completely good utilisation of time to debate upon which books are taught in which college of England and what are their rules.

A blind notion has entered into our bones about this. The way a Tibetan thinks that piety can be attained by hiring a man to turn a wheel with mantras written on it, similarly we think that somehow if an assembly is established and we run it with the help of a committee, then only would we gain good results. In fact, it seems that that establishment is the gain. Since quite some time now, we have set up a Science Association, and following that, every year we rue that our countrymen are indifferent toward the study of science. But it is one thing to set up a Science Association while to inspire devotion in the hearts of countrymen about the study of science is something else. It is evidence of the extreme machine dependence of Kaliyug² to think that countrymen would become scientists simply by setting up a Science Association.

The truth is that it is necessary to reach the hearts of the countrymen; if so done, what few arrangements can be made, would yield complete fruit. When India gave education, how she reached into hearts is something we should think about - I would not forbid you to mark the dates on the academic calendars of foreign universities with the intent of extracting juice from them, but alongside that, this analysis too is not a negligible matter. It is indeed necessary to think what I will teach but it is no less important to consider how I will reach the hearts of those I would teach.

Legends of your country have it that once upon a time the *gurugriha*³ of India was in the *tapovan*⁴ or sacred woods. However, it is not that we have a clear picture of a *tapovan* and the picture has been much obscured by the fogs of the supernatural.

I would neither enter into debate nor would I be able to do so regarding the exact nature of these ashrams in the period when they actually existed. But it is certain that the ones who lived in these ashrams were family men and their disciples would serve them like offspring and receive

² According to Hindu mythology, the entire expanse of human time is divided into a number of ages or yugas i.e, *Satya*, *Treta*, *Dwapar* and *Kali*. Of these the last, our own, is deemed to be the darkest, full of evil and falsehoods.

³ In ancient India, there was a custom of students living in the *griha* or the house of their guru where they would learn and serve the guru in every way.

⁴ The ancient legends, epics and scriptures of India state that sages would reside and meditate deep within forest. These forests were deemed sacred and were known as *tapovan*.

education from them. The same thought- process still somewhat guides the tols or schools of Sanskrit learning in our country.

If we observe these tols, we would be able to perceive that in those schools it is not most important to study the text; rather, there is an atmosphere of studying and teaching that prevails over there. The guru too remains immersed in that study; not only that, the lifestyle is really simple; materialism and luxury cannot prey upon the mind thereby affording time and opportunity for education to become one with one's nature. It is not my aim to signify that the same thought does not prevail in the eminent centres of learning in Europe.

According to the dictums of ancient India, the period of learning should be one of maintaining *brahmacharya*⁵ and dwelling in the home of the guru.

It is not as if the maintaining of *brahmacharya* signifies the observation of severe austerity. The ones who lead a life of domesticity are unable to walk the path of their natures properly. Many a time they are made to waver unnecessarily by the various currents that issue from different sides and from clashes with various people - the instincts that ought to remain as seeds within them at a certain time, germinate prematurely owing to artificial impact; this only leads to a wastage of strength rendering the mind weak and making them miss their goal.

However, it is extremely necessary to prevent the nature from being perverted by all kinds of artificial causalities and keep it natural right from the earliest hours of one's life. To soften the impact of the premature germination of instincts and intense excitement of luxury on the sprouting of humanity, is the aim of maintaining *brahmacharya*.

Actually it is a pleasurable state for the boys to remain within this regulation of nature. This helps in their fullest development, in this they can truly enjoy the ecstasy of freedom. Through this, their newly-blossomed, pure and strong minds generate light within their entire bodies.

Nowadays there is the trend of moral studies instead of maintaining *brahmacharya*. In whatsoever manner possible, moral lectures must be delivered to the students - this seems to be the intention of parents in the country.

⁵ Since the Vedic period, it was prescribed that man's life would be divided into four stages the first of them being *brahmacharya*. this was the stage of learning, when one would go to the gurugriha for education. *Brahmacharya* is also characterised by self-control in every way as well as sexual abstinence.

This too is related to that machine. Akin to feeding a daily dosage of blood-purifying medicine is a dose of moral lectures - it is a due; it is a fixed measure for improving a child.

The thing called “moral lecture” is oppositional. It can, in no way, be pleasant. He who is lectured upon is made to stand in the questioning box of a court. The lecture either goes tangentially over his head or it hurts him. This not only leads to the futility of the attempt, moreover it also causes harm in many cases. To render goodness dry and fruitless is so harmful to human society that nothing can match it - but many a good man is involved in such an effort- one grows alarmed at the sight of this.

It cannot be hoped for that dictates from books learnt from ten to four at school would correct everything where a thousand different falsehoods and perversions of the artificiality of daily domestic life are destroying one’s tastes. This leads only to the manufacturing of loads of pretentiousness and moral high ground which are the worst kind of precociousness – they destroy the naturalness and tenderness of mind.

Through the maintenance of *brahmacharya*, one’s good tastes with respect to dharma are naturalized- it does not lecture but imparts strength. Morality is not imposed superficially like an ornament; rather, life is moulded in accordance with dharma and thus dharma is not made out as one standing in opposition but is rendered intimate with life. So at the hour of developing one’s character and mind, it is not lecture but conducive environment and conducive regulations that are the most necessary.

Not only the maintenance of this *brahmacharya*, there must also be harmony with universal nature. The thing called a city has been created for man’s convenience of work; but it is not our natural residence. That we would be born in the lap of bricks, cement and mortar and be thus reared, was not the ruling of the Creator. The flowers & greenery, the Sun & the Moon have no demands from offices of the city of offices, it snatches us from the lap of living and green universal nature and digests us in its hot and churning stomach. Those who are accustomed to this and intoxicated by work, do not feel any sense of lack regarding this - they have strayed from the path of natural habit and move away everyday from contact with the greater world.

So, before one has to collapse and surrender to the whirlpool of work, it is entirely essentially to have the aid of nature at the age of learning and developing. Trees, clear shy, open

air, clean ponds and lakes, open meadows are no less necessary than the association of benches, boards, books and examinations.

From time immemorial the mind of India has been developed through intimate contact with the great universal nature. It has become habitual for India to thoroughly immerse oneself within the consciousness of the world. The Brahmins of the tapovans had chanted this mantra-

*Yō dēbhōhōagnōu yōhōpsu yō vishwang bhuvanmabibēsh.
Ya oshadhishu yō banaspatishu tasmai dēbaya namō namaha*

The God who is in fire, in water, immersed within the universe, who is in plants, in trees, I bow down to that God.

To learn to see, in completeness, fire, air, water and land, through the soul of the universe, is true learning. This learning is not properly possible in the schools of a city; there, in the factory of learning, we can only learn the universe as a machine.

But people nowadays would pooh-pooh it away as mysticism so it is not needed to disrespect the entire discussion regarding this.

In spite of this, that open sky and open air and trees are truly essential for the proper development of a human child's mind and body, is something that perhaps even the most work-oriented people would not be able to dismiss. When age would increase, office would start its pull, crowds would push one along and the mind would be engaged in miscellaneous affairs, the direct connection of the heart with universal nature would be much severed. Before that can happen, let there be a proper introduction to the eternal water, land, sky and air in whose lap we have been born and who is our nurse; let us learn her lofty code, then only would we be true human beings. When the hearts of the boys are young, their curiosity alive and all the senses strong, let them then play beneath the blue sky and the playground of clouds and sunshine- do not deprive them of the embrace of the earth. Let each day of theirs be revealed by the enlightened fingers of Sunrise in the gentle and pure mornings and the sombre sunlit evening silently melt their evening into the starlit darkness. Let there be in front of them the play in six acts of the six seasons with their various flavours and music in the leaf-adorned playhouse of nature. Let them stand beneath the trees and behold - the new monsoon, like a just- anointed crown prince, roaring with joy, is casting the shadow of coming rains with its clusters of moisture-laden clouds on the eternally waiting

forest lands. And let them be gratified at the sight of the green fulfilment stretching to the horizon on the bedewed heart of the earth. O mature guardian, o materialist, however much you have rendered your imagination dead, your heart stony, for heaven's sake, do not honourably say that there is no need of this; do let your boys feel the touch of the colours of the universal mother with this great wide world - just because you do not feel within yourself how much more effective this is compared to the investigation of the inspector and the question paper of the examiner, do not neglect it entirely.

When the mind is at home then it requires huge leisure around it. That leisure reigns in widespread and varied beauty within universal nature. In no way can the nature of the boys develop in a healthy manner by somehow gulping down one's meal by nine-thirty or ten in order to be present in the prison house of education. What misery has been created in the early hour of human life by surrounding education with walls, enclosing it with gates, putting it under surveillance with security guards, littering it with the threat of punishments and urging it on with bells! Is the child at offence for having been born without learning algebra or memorizing the dates of history? So, should those wretches be deprived of sky and air, joy and leisure, and education be made to become their punishment in every way? Are the children not born ignorant so that they can slowly derive joy from transforming to knowledge from ignorance? If owing to our inability and barbarism, we are unable to render learning joyous, why do we shape schools of innocent children into prisons knowingly, intentionally and with utter cruelty? It was the intent of the Creator to reveal learning to children through the wide-open leisure of the universal nature. The extent to which we are rendering that intent futile, we are becoming equally futile. Break down the walls of the prisonhouse - do not subject the children to the sentence of rigorous imprisonment just because they have not become scholars within the ten months in their mother's womb, have pity on them.

Therefore I say, we still need forests for education and the *gurugriha* or the dwelling of the guru is required as well. Forests are our living residence and the guru is our sympathetic teacher. In this forest, in this *gurugriha*, boys have to complete their education by maintaining *brahmacharya* today as well. No matter how much our circumstances have changed in accordance with the passage of time, there is no lessening of the usefulness of this regulation of learning because this regulation is founded upon the eternal truth of human character.

Therefore if an ideal school needs to be established, then the arrangement for it needs to be made away from a locality in the midst of solitary, open sky, wide expanse and greenery. There the teachers would engage in solitary studying and teaching and the students would grow up at the heart of that centre of learning.

If possible, it is necessary that there be some land for cultivation alongside the school; crops from that land would feed the school, students would help in the work of farming. Cows would be there for milk and butter and students would have to be a part of taking care of the cows. During breaks from classes, they would themselves do gardening - dig soil, water the plants, build fences; thus they would establish not only a relation of thoughts with nature but also a relation of work.

In the conducive season, classes for the students would be arranged underneath large, shadowy trees. Some parts of their lessons would be completed by wandering among the trees with their teacher. They would spend their evening leisure in studying the stars, learning music and listening to the tales of legend and history.

If they err in their ways, they would do penance following our ancient customs. Punishment comes from the other as the result of offence, penance is the process of self-correction. To accept penalty is one's duty and if the same is not done, it does not wash clean one's sense of guilt - this education must be inculcated since childhood; it is not befitting of humanity to demean oneself by rendering one's own self punishable by another.

If permitted, then I will pluck my courage to say something more on this topic. This school would have no need of benches, tables and stools. No one should think that I am saying this because I am prejudiced against English things. My opinion is that the ideal has to be made evident in every way that this school is diminishing all things unnecessary. It is not easy for everyone to have access to benches, tables and desks but no one can rob them of the floor. Benches and tables actually rob one of the floor. This leads to a state where if we are obliged to use the floor, we find no comfort in it, it becomes inconvenient. This is a great loss. Our country is not one of cold weather, our attire is not that we cannot sit on the floor but following the habit of a different country, we are increasing our troubles by creating an excess of furniture. As much as we render the unnecessary essential, likewise would there be a waste of our strength. However, we do not have the affordability of rich Europe; that which is easy for her is a burden for us. While arranging any

event, right at the onset one faints at the number of furniture and rooms required. In this calculation, it is the unnecessary that prevails over three- fourths of the matter. None of us dares to say that we would start our work from an earthen room, the meetings would be held on mats spread over the floor. If we are able to say this, then half of our burden is reduced with no particular difference to the work concerned. But our honour is not satisfied, our imagination not fulfilled if we do not start every work in imitation of the ideal of that country which lacks no strength, where wealth is overflowing. This causes the lion's share of our small energy to get exhausted leaving us unable to fuel the actual work. As long as we learnt our lessons on rugs spread on floor, we had no worries in establishing schools but now there is the prevalence of pencils and slates in the market, yet the trouble lies in the setting up of the school. This can be seen in every matter. Earlier when the arrangements were fewer, socialization was much more; now the arrangements are on the increase and socialization is drying up. There was a time in our country when we deemed furniture as wealth but not as civility; that is because the keepers of civilization then had no excess of furniture. They had kept the country healthy and genteel by civilizing poverty. If at least during the days of education we can emulate this ideal then, if not anything else, we would acquire a few abilities - to sit on the floor, to eat coarse food, the ability to carry out the maximum possible work with minimum possible resources - these are not any less abilities and these require endeavour. Accessibility, simplicity and ease involve actual civility - the complexity of multifarious arrangements is barbarism; actually, it is the heaped garbage of copiously perspiring inability. It has to be learnt in school from childhood that the lack of a few inanimate objects should not lead to the lessening of respect for humanity rather in most places it enhances natural brilliance - it has to be taught not by futile lecture but by evident examples. Without this education not only would we grow habituated to demean our hands, feet, floor and the earth but would despise our forefathers and would never be able to realize the glory of the endeavour practised in ancient India.

Here the point would be raised that if you do not want to value external gloss, then you have to specially increase the value of that which lies within - can we afford to do so? At the onset, in order to establish an ashram for learning, a guru is needed. A teacher becomes available as soon as one advertises in the newspaper but a guru cannot be made to order.

To this I would reply that it is true that we cannot demand more than what we can afford. Even if it be extremely necessary, it is within nobody's control to produce the great sage

Yajnavalkya in place of the teacher at our school. But it has to be considered that at times it does happen that we do not call upon all the resources that we possess and thus cannot make our entire capital functional. If we use an entire pitcher of water to stick a stamp on an envelope then most of the water becomes unnecessary; on the other hand, the entire pitcher does become empty if we need it to bathe; the utilization of the same pitcher rises and falls depending upon one's use. The one we appoint as a teacher in the school is used in such a way that a very little part of his heart and mind is needed for his work - it is possible to make a school teacher by adding a cane and some brains to a phonograph machine. But if the same teacher is placed on the seat of a guru then naturally all the strength of his heart and mind would collectively issue forth toward the student. Of course he would not be able to deliver more than his ability but to deliver less would be embarrassing for him. If the specific demand is not raised from one side, complete activation of the other's strength does not happen on the other side. If the country prays sincerely from her heart then a lot more strength and resource of the country would strive toward becoming a guru compared to what is presently employed as school teachers.

Now the order of the day is that the teacher comes to the student out of necessity but the order of nature is that the student gains a guru. The teacher is a shop-keeper, to give lessons is his business. He is in search of customers. People can buy objects from a businessman but no one can expect that there would be affection, respect and devotion on the list of his commodities. In accordance with this expectation, the teacher takes his salary and sells the object called learning - herein ends all relation with the student. Even in such adverse circumstances, many teachers rise above such relation of give and take- that happens by virtue of their special greatness. If this teacher comes to know that he is sitting on the seat of the guru - if by his life he has to awaken life within his student, by his knowledge light the lamp of learning, by his affection do the good of the student, then only can he acquire glory - then he would move to give such a thing that is not a commodity, that which is beyond valuation; so, not by the dint of his strictness but by the natural laws of dharma would he become worthy of respect from the students. Even if he takes a salary for his livelihood, he glorifies his duty by giving far more than that. Nobody is unaware of how, in the schools of Bengal being under the influence of a perverse star, numerous senior and junior teachers have shamelessly exposed before the entire country the disgrace of their greed for a livelihood. Had they been in the seat of a guru, under the glory of this position and natural impulses of the heart, they would have been unable to render their business despicable by behaving like constables

towards their young wards. Should we not save the teachers and students of our country from this debasement of shop-keeping called education?

But perhaps it is futile to engage in such extended discussions. May be many are in contention against the fundamental notion. I know that many are of the opinion that it is not beneficial for students to be sent away from their homes for the sake of education.

Regarding this, my first statement is that for the sake of what we nowadays know to be education, any school in the lanes closest to home and at the most, a private tutor, is enough. But I have already stated the inferiority of this kind of education that echoes the proverb “He who learns would ride in cars” and its wretchedness and stinginess towards the human child is unsuitable.

Secondly, I can accept that it is not right to send boys away from the homes for education if the home is worthy. Potters, ironsmiths, weavers and such artisans rear their boys at home only because the teaching that they want to impart can be done well at home. If the ideal of education is slightly higher then there is need to send the boys to school; nobody says then that it is best to be taught by the parents because owing to many reasons, that does not become possible. If the ideal of education can be raised a little more high, if we do not look toward examination-result-oriented bookish knowledge, if we determine the establishment of the foundation of holistic humanity to be the target of education, then it is not at all possible to arrange for it at home or school.

In society, some are businessmen, some are lawyers, some are wealthy landlords while some may be in other professions. The environment and ways of each of their homes are separate. The children in their homes start to get moulded in a certain kind of way since childhood.

The speciality that is naturally inculcated within an individual by dint of diverse living is something inevitable and in this way, by adopting the specific manners of different professions, people get separated into different categories but for the boys, to unknowingly get moulded like their parents before entering family life, is not beneficial.

For instance, let us take the son of a wealthy man. The son is born at home of a wealthy person but does not carry anything special as the son of a wealthy man. The son of a wealthy man

and the son of a poor man come with no distinction. Man starts to build this distinction himself from the day after the birth.

In such circumstances, it should have been the role of the parents to initially acclimatise their son with simplicity and later, as needed, mould him like the son of a wealthy man. But that does not happen; before he can fully learn to be a human child, he becomes the son of a wealthy man and through this a huge part of the rare human birth is left off his fortune, many abilities to enjoy the varied flavours of life dwindle away. At the very onset, the parents cripple their son in spite of the presence of his limbs like a bird with clipped wings. He has no opportunity to walk, a car is essential; there is no chance of carrying the smallest of loads, a porter is needed; there is no chance of doing one's own jobs, a servant is essential. This happens not only because of the lack of physical strength; mindful of society, that unfortunate boy becomes paralysed despite having healthy limbs. That which is easy becomes painful to him, that which is natural becomes embarrassing. With an eye to the people of this group, he has to be captive under such unnecessary strictures that he is deprived of many rights of a natural human. In case someone does not regard him to be wealthy, he cannot bear such a shame and for that he has to bear an enormous burden and in the world, be limited at every step by that burden. Even if he has to fulfil his duty he has to do so bearing the weight of that burden, if he has to rest, then too he has to bear the same burden, while travelling too he has to drag that burden along. That happiness lies within and not in external pomp - this simple truth is erased from his mind through every effort and he is rendered subject to a thousand varied lifeless objects. He inflates his meagre necessities to such an extent that it becomes impossible for him to bear sacrifices, unendurable for him to bear suffering. There is none so imprisoned, so crippled in the world. Should we still have to say that these parents, who by positing artificial inability as a matter of pride, have filled the farmlands of the world with weeds, are the well-wishers of their children? Those who give in to luxury after attaining adulthood cannot be restrained by anyone - but children, who do not despise soil or dust, who pray for sun, rain and air, who suffer when made to dress up, whose pleasure lies in examining the world by all of their senses, who are not ashamed, hesitant, full of ego about their nature, to distort them by effort and render them eternally incapable of everything, is possible only by the parents - save these innocents from the hands of such parents.

We know that in many homes the boys and girls are accustomed to English ways. They are brought up by ayahs, learn distorted Hindi, forget Bengali and the son of the Bengali who is nurtured drawing sustenance from varied and multifarious sources of Bengali society since time immemorial, is severed off those natural ties with one's own people- but, on the other hand, they also do not have relation with the English society. They are uprooted from the forest and reared in foreign tin pots. I have heard with my own ears a boy, seeing some Indianised relatives approaching from a distance, addressing his mother and saying – “Mamma, Mamma, look, lots of babus are coming” [sic]. What more misfortune can befall the son of a Bengali? The ones who, after growing up, adopt English ways through exercising their free tastes and inclinations, can do so but the parents who by huge misexpense and misendeavour, by dragging their children out of every society and rendering them unsuitable inside the country and unacceptable abroad, preparing their children for future distress by binding them to the safety of their own uncertain and time-bound incomes - would there be cause for worry if the boys are kept away from such parents?

There is a reason why I gave the last-mentioned example. Those who are not accustomed to the adopted English ways would be hit hard by this example. They certainly would think within themselves - why do people not understand – why, oblivious to the entire future, do they bring such ruin upon the boys by the blindness of some of their own distorted habits?

But bear in mind, the ones who are accustomed to follow English ways do so easefully, they do not even feel that they are causing any harmful habits in their children. From this, it has to be understood that we are unaware of the specific perversions within ourselves; we are so used to them that even if they cause harm or inconvenience to others, we are indifferent to it. We think that even if there be various kinds of anger, jealousy, unfair nepotism, quarrels, oppositions, disgrace, prevalence of evil habits and superstitions within the family, it is the most dangerous for the boys to stay away from the family. That there can be harm in someone else being reared in the atmosphere where I have been reared, is something that does not even occur to us. But if the ideal of rearing is pure, if I do not think that making the son grow into an average worker like us is enough, then it would certainly occur to us that during the age for learning, it is necessary to keep boys in a place where according to natural laws, they would grow up being intimate with universal nature, maintaining *brahmacharya*, acquiring learning in living with the guru.

The foetus had to remain in the womb and the seed within the earth hidden away, surrounded by its necessary nutrients. Then day and night it has only one activity - to prepare itself for the sky and the light by absorbing nutrition. Then it does not collect its food, it absorbs it from all sides. Nature keeps it surrounded in a conducive concealment supplied with food - external aggressions cannot reach it and its strength is not destroyed by various attractions.

The age for learning is a similar state of mental foetushood for students. It is that natural law that during this time they would live in a shelter of alive knowledge and mental nutrition hidden away from the distractions of the external world. At this time, everything around them must be conducive to them so that the only activity of their mind is to fortify itself, knowingly or unknowingly, by absorbing food and building strength.

Society and domestic life are the place of work and a field for the play of varied instincts - there it is very difficult to create a conducive situation for boys, in the age of their education, to acquire strength and lay the foundation for a complete life in peace. When their education would be complete they would attain the ability of becoming family men - but it is not possible to acquire the suitable humanity for leading a domestic life if one has an undisciplined upbringing within the conflicts of all the instincts of family life - one can become a materialist, one can become a businessman but it is difficult to become a human being. Once upon a time, because the ideal of domestic life was very high in our country, the three varnas⁶ of society were instructed and arranged to prepare themselves before entering family life by maintaining *brahmacharya*. It has been ages since that ideal has been lost and we have adopted no great ideal in its place and that is why we are satisfied now at being clerks, office superintendents, police officers, deputy magistrates - we do not consider being more than that to be bad but to be an excess.

But being much greater than that too would not be an excess. I am not speaking only from the side of the Hindus⁷ - it would not be an excess in any age in any country. This particular education process has not been followed in other countries but they are waging wars, doing

⁶ The Vedic period divided the entire society into four categories known as varnas. Hierarchically from top to bottom, they were Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra.

⁷ The Vedic education system that Tagore has set as the ideal was a product of Hindu religion. So Tagore, here, wishes to clarify that he is not advocating for Hindu exclusivity. Rather the positive qualities of the Vedic education system can be universally applicable. It is mention worthy that Tagore himself was not a Hindu but a Brahmo by religion.

business, creating telegraph wires, driving railway engines - we are deluded at the sight of that; that this delusion would be broken by discussing an essay at a meeting, is something that cannot be expected. So I fear that now, while creating the National Council of Education, we would look at examples everywhere but within our own country and own history and thus make another likeness of a moulded mechanical school. We do not trust nature, we have no reliance upon human beings, we have no other resort but machines. In our minds we understand that men would grow into saints simply by setting up machines of moral education and the third eye of knowledge would open simply by trapping them in bookish knowledge.

Undoubtedly it is more difficult to establish an ashram suited to delivering of knowledge than setting up a customary school. But to render this difficult task easy would be the work of India. That is because the ideal of the ashram has not yet left our minds and we are also aware of the diverse learning of Europe. We have to create co-ordination between the gaining of knowledge and the process of learning. If we are incapable of this then by concentrating only on the artificial, we would fail in every way. Whenever we want our rights we stretch out our palms in front of the other and wherever we wish to create, we sit down to imitate - we do not look at our own strength and own mind, at the nature and actual need of the country, we do not dare to look. The education that has led to this condition of ours - that it would bear different fruits if only we set that education up with a new name - I have no inclination to proceed in the direction of one more failure with such an expectation. We have to bear this in mind that it is not as if wherever monetary contributions rain down, education accumulates there in greater degree, humanity cannot be bought with money; where regulations of committees constantly rain, it is not as if education-mindedness grows rapidly over there, only regulations, even if they are excellent, do not feed the human mind; it is not as if the sum total of gain in education increases by just arranging for the study of many subjects; the one who grows is “*na medhayā na bahunā śrutena*.”⁸ Where there is solitary *tapasya* or endeavour, there only can we learn; where sacrifice is hidden and arduous practice is in isolation, there only can we gain strength, where giving is complete there only is it possible to receive completely; where the teachers are themselves engaged in the pursuit of knowledge, there only can the student see the manifestation of knowledge; where the appearance

⁸ The complete sentence reads: “*nāyam ātmā pravacanena labhyo na medhayā na bahunā śrutena*” signifying that one would not gain anything by being the recipient of mere eloquent presentation that is devoid of substance.

of the universal nature outside is unobstructed, the mind within is blossomed fully only there; where the character is healthy and within one's own control through the maintaining of *brahmacharya*, there the education of dharma is simple and natural; and where there are only books and teachers, senate and syndicate,⁹ brick houses and wooden furniture, from there we would emerge tomorrow with as much exponential growth as we can already perceive at present.

⁹ This can be interpreted as an ironic reference to the pre-existing University of Calcutta.

NATIONAL SCHOOL¹

The National School² has already been established in Bengal—now is there any need to establish its benefits by means of logical argument?

Very few things in the world have been stopped owing to the lack of logic. That a need is fulfilled simply by explaining that there is a need—there is no proof of this at least in our country. We do have a good deal of scarcity—there are also plenty of people to explain that there is scarcity and there is no shortage of people who would accept it as so; still it makes no difference.

Actually, logic cannot create any great thing. It only leads to a broken voice when one tries to come to terms with something through statistical lists of profit, loss and need; it amounts to nothing constructive. The audience applauds the research but does not feel it essential to do something more.

One of the problems of our country is that be it education, health or resources, we had, in a way, forgotten that the responsibility of the matter lies with us. Thus, our understanding, or the lack of it, were almost the same regarding these matters. We know that the responsibility of the country's welfare lies with the government; so there is no scope for moving towards a venture by means of understanding what we may or may not lack. Such irresponsible discussion is detrimental to masculinity.³ It further increases the dependence upon others.

That our motherland is our field of work and only we are her chief workers—in fact, if others oblige us by lightening our burden, by lessening the toughness of our self-endeavour, they

¹ “*Jatiya Vidyalaya*”, August 1906.

² *Jatiya Siksha Parishad* or the National Council of Education was inaugurated at a historic meeting held at the Town Hall, Calcutta, on 14 August 1906, and was presided over by Rash Behari Bose. This essay was read out by Tagore at this meeting. In the essay Tagore refers to the *Jatiya Siksha Parishad* as “*Jatiya Vidyalaya*”, that translates literally as “National School”. This nomenclature has been maintained throughout the essay.

³ Since Tagore has used a highly gendered term in Bengali, the equivalence is retained in translation. It is done in order to afford possibilities of critique that such a usage opens up.

would only render us into cowards by depriving us of our own task—when we realise this beyond a doubt, then only would it be a conducive time for discussing other issues.

We hear of an English proverb—“Where there is a will, there is a way.” None says that the way lies only where logic exists. We had no faith in the properly masculine idea that our will can create a path for us. We knew that we could make the wish but the fulfillment or lack of it would depend upon others—our role would be limited to signing upon an appeal.

Thus, for all these days, we have done nothing based upon our judgement and understanding of what is lacking. Purposeless discussions of protests and movements have caused our nature to not attain true strength. That is why it was highly essential to feel within ourselves the evidence of the impact that willpower may have. There was a sincere waiting to realize not the extent to which the ruling power favours us, but the certainty of the great power that lies within us.

By fortune’s benediction we have somehow been introduced to that power. Today, we perceived clearly that will is the wealth of gods; the foundation of all creation lies in will. Neither logic nor debate, nor the calculation of profit and loss, rather a surge of will somehow flooded the Bengali mind and in the very next moment, breaking through all the obstacles and doubts, like the fruit of unbroken virtue, the National School system took its form. The *yajna* or sacrificial fire of will was alight within the heart of the Bengali and from its flames emerged the Divine One with the fruits of the *yajna* in hand—now would be eradicated the barrenness of our prolonged empty discussions. That which cannot be achieved by effort, labour or argument—that which would have been regarded as impossible, inconsistent and untimely by any mature and prudent person going through the older account books—has today materialized as truth with such ease and in such little time!

After a long time, the Bengali has truly attained something. It is not as if there is only profit for the present in this attainment; rather, it is our strength. That we have the capacity to attain, what the capacity is and wherein it lies—we understood just that. With the beginning of this attainment, the path to our gain has opened up. It is not as if we gained the School; rather, we gained our own truth, our own ability.

I want to sing praises to that very joy in front of you all. Let us not forget how to receive that which has appeared in Bengal today. It is not as if a few of us, after debates and arguments, have somehow strung together a convenient toy with leaves and twigs. The embodiment of welfare has taken birth in the delivery room of our Mother Bengal. Let the conches be sounded to celebrate the joy that has come to the country's arena—let all of us be prepared with gifts—may nobody be niggardly on this day.

There would be time later to think about convenience and inconvenience; today we must feel pride and start celebrations. To the students I say, fill your hearts with pride today and enter your motherland's temple of learning—you must feel that the successful embodiment of the strength of the Bengali race has summoned you to her throne; if you regard her truly, she would gain in strength and we, in turn, would be able to imbibe that strength in ourselves. All meagre personal sense of gain and loss is insignificant compared to this strength of the national power. If you feel a sense of pride in this school, then only would it gain in glory. Its glory does not lie in a fine size, great fields or huge arrangements but in your respect, devotion and the self-surrender of the Bengali. The will of the Bengali has created it and the devotion of the Bengali would protect it—therein lies its glory and in that very glory we will find our glory.

Till the sense of pride did not germinate within ourselves, we would keep comparing our programme with that of others and feel ashamed and disappointed by it. We would keep feeling the urge to compare our school with schools of other countries—we would be proud in the similarities but would feel belittled at the dissimilarities.

But such a comparison can apply only to a non-living object. A living thing cannot be measured by a yardstick or a set of scales. This National School that has been established today in our country is, as I say, not a non-living entity—we have poured out our lives into creating a life. So it does not end with just the setting up—it will grow and move—there is the great potential for future within it. Who can possibly measure that? Any Bengali who would feel the beating heart of this school within himself would not evaluate it in terms of the price of its brick and mortar. Rather, in its initiation, he would feel the completeness of its final outcome and he only would collate its explicit and implicit being into a true wholeness and surrender himself to it with joy.

So today I implore the students, feel the beating heart of this school—realise within yourselves how there has occurred a link between the heart of this school and the heart of the entire

Bengali race—never mistake it merely as a school. This great responsibility rests on your shoulders. The responsibility of protecting the absolute treasure of the motherland is being bestowed upon you all and you have to understand it with sincere devotion and modesty. This would require austere practice. Till date no other school has asked anything so demanding from you. Do not let this school be demeaned by expecting some easy opportunities from it. With supreme effort, hold it as high as your heads; maintain its hardworking ideology as the highest. Let no one shame it. Let no one be able to mock it. Let everyone acknowledge that we have not resorted to any trick in order to indulge laxity and enoble inertness by calling it by an exalted name. That you will have to engage in efforts harder than before and follow abstinence more strongly than you did previously—adopt it as your vow, as your dharma. That is because this school will not be able to bind you by some external discipline or temptation. If you disregard any of its decrees, you would not be deprived of the chance to secure any rank or degree. Bearing in mind only your motherland, your dharma, the pride of your race and the dignity of your character regularly, you would have to surrender to all the challenging mechanism of this school voluntarily and via humble self-devotion.

When you think about this school of ours, consider that rainfall is futile in the country where there is no body of water. If there is no place to hold the water, the optimum use of the water gets nullified. It is not as if no erudite, qualified or meritorious person is born to our country; but there is no arrangement in our country to preserve their erudition, qualities and merits. They work in offices, in trade, they earn, they go by the orders of the other, and afterwards, when they are pensioned off, they cannot think of anything to occupy their days with. In this manner so much ability is draining off or evaporating from the face of the country regularly. We know it for certain that it is not that our country has been cursed by providence to receive no great talent. But we have made no arrangement to apply the strength of the country for the sake of the country or to collect all that strength somewhere. That is why we have no way of seeing or feeling the strength that is present in our country. If anyone defames us by calling us cowards, we have to search the official documents of the government for a list of the names of Ray Bahadurs⁴—we have to try and prove

⁴ “Ray Bahadur” was an honorary title conferred upon members of the Indian feudal aristocracy or upper class by the British Government generally in exchange of some favourable service rendered to the government by that individual.

our ability on the basis of mere temporary prowess. But neither do we derive true consolation from it nor does our self-confidence become truly internalized.

In such trying times, this National School has appeared in front of us like a way granted by providence through which we may amass strength. The greatness of the country would be naturally attracted to this place and like the eternal provisions of the Bengali, be stored and increased in this coffer. Have we not received the evidence of this within very little time? The highly influential and honourable people whom we have gained quickly in this school—would their immense ability not have been weakly scattered simply for the want of an invitation, for the want of apt application? This is no small fortune of ours. Where the elders of the country are gathering voluntarily and with full vigour, there itself has the education of the students of the country been arranged—this is not a matter of ordinary welfare. The ones truly capable of giving are coming ready to give with respect and the worthy receivers too are standing respectfully with folded hands in order to receive—on such an auspicious occasion both the giver and the receiver are gratified and its site is also rendered scared.

We regret the fact that our countrymen cannot make sacrifices for the sake of welfare work. Why can they not do so? That is because welfare work does not emerge as truth to them. We carry the responsibility of some worthy tasks and that is very essential for us. Had it not been so then our meagre daily self-interest would have appeared as too great to us. I admit that till date we have not been able to make much sacrifice for the sake of the welfare of the country. But if the embodiment of welfare had appeared in front of us, then could we have been able to not recognize it and not sacrifice for it? Sacrifice comes naturally to man but that which inspires it cannot be facile; a bill for collection and an invitation card are completely incapable of exerting a pull over our hearts and purses.

The race which has been incapable of arranging a true and evident purpose for self-sacrifice for itself has a small heart and its gains are commonplace. It is compelled to view the papers of the Company,⁵ bank deposits and chances of employment as paramount. It does not believe in any great ideal from the heart because where the ideal simply remains as an ideal and is not actualized

⁵ Shares of the East India Company.

through work, it is not entirely trustworthy. It cannot lay claims to complete truth. Thus, we express an attitude of pity towards it and see it as a beggar; sometimes we deign to give it a little bit of something while at others we ignore it with mistrust. The country where great ideals and immense duties go from door to door begging for favour can never expect welfare.

Today the National School has appeared in front of us as the embodiment of welfare. In it has manifested the complete relation between mind, speech and action. We would never be able to disavow it. We have to arrange for its worship. A race attains greatness only by establishing such institutions worthy of worship. Therefore, the National School would not only facilitate welfare by virtue of educating students but the presence of a great worship-worthy event would, consciously or unconsciously, take us towards greatness.

Bearing this in mind, today we will invoke and salute the National School. Bearing this in mind, we will protect it and obey it. To protect it is to protect one's own self, to obey it is to respect one's own self.

But if it be indeed true that we are born bearing the bondage of slavery within our very souls and cannot move ahead without being whipped to do so—then only would we be intolerant of the discipline of the honourable personages of our motherland, then only would our minds be greedy for the slightest loophole and our hearts rebel at self-control and difficulty of learning.

But I do not wish to think of these inauspicious thoughts today. The path ahead is long and difficult as well; today we have to begin our journey with hope as our guide. Like the sun's rays rising over Udayachal,⁶ this hope and faith have marked the beginning of any great day for all fortunate races. We would not allow the lessening of this hope and faith even by the smallest degree today. Let there be no weakness in this hope, no lack of courage in this faith. May we not feel ourselves as inferior within our own selves. Let us fully comprehend that within our country, within each of our countrymen, lies a wonderful wish of providence. That wish would not be fulfilled by any other race of any other country. Whatever we give to the country would be of our very own giving; it would not be the leftovers of any other. Our forefathers had made arrangements for that gift within the *tapovan*; we too have moulded those different ingredients into oneness, fit

⁶ A mythical mountain over which the sun rises every day.

for construction, in the furnace of our varied sufferings and unbearable injuries. Their austere endeavour and our unbearable suffering cannot be futile.

I initiate the prelude of inaugurating this school with the great expectation in the heart that this National School would prepare us to assume the right that Indians⁷ have in the world. The marker of good education is that it does not overwhelm mankind; rather, it sets one free. For all this time, the education that we had derived from schools and colleges had defeated us. We had learnt it by heart, recited it and propagated doubtlessly the rote learning as the ultimate truth. The history that we have learnt in the English books consists of all our historical knowledge; the political economy that we have memorized became our only political economy. Whatever we have learnt has occupied our souls like a spirit that makes us utter those memorized words from our mouths and makes us feel that we ourselves are talking. We are thinking that apart from political civilization, there can be no other civilization. We have decided that the outcome that is visible in European history is the only possible positive outcome for any other race. That which fits the code of another country is something we know as the only possible welfare and are eager to do good for our country by following the methods of an entirely different land.

If man is buried under the weight of such education, I cannot in any way consider it as good. The result of education should be the development of the strength that is innate to us and the realization of the potential that lies within us. It is not a matter of pride that we would be rendered into walking compendiums and living notebooks of professors. When have we dared to examine the history of the world with our individual eyes? When have we sought to verify political economy by our individual research? Who we are, wherein lies our realization, the place to which India has been assigned by providence—how does one see the Great Truth and in which form from that place—empowered by education, when have we discovered all of this? What we only do:

We go in fear, we look in fear

We rote out books in fear

Alas, education has entirely defeated us!

⁷ It is interesting to note that Tagore, here, mentions India specifically for the first time in this essay.

Today I hope that, breaking through the shackles of education, we would emerge in the free light of education. Where we were alone for all these days, today the world has come there—the history of multiple races has opened its pages for us—waves of light are striking upon our thoughts across ages and across countries—there is no limit to learning and the wealth of ideas have been heaped up—now is the time when we do not merely, like an overwhelmed boy, wander lost in this fair at our doors. The time is upon us when with all our hearts, we would boldly accost all these diverse objects from varied lands and would make them entirely our own. Our mind would bestow upon them a wonderful wholeness and within our minds they would be divided into their rightful places. In that arrangement, truth would be newly illumined and newly broadened in order to be regarded as a new wealth of man’s treasury of knowledge. Maitreyi, learned in *Brahmajnan*,⁸ had proclaimed that the nectar of the gods is not to be found in material wealth; be it of learning or of property—material objects can only ensnare us and cause illusions.⁹ When the mind gains victory over all material objects, it finally realizes itself and then only does it attain the divine nectar. India too must now engage in that endeavour; she has to realise herself holistically through various ideals and learning—she has to tear away the chains of foreign scholarship and be fulfilled by mature knowledge. From today “*bhadram karṇebhiḥ śṛṇuyāma devāḥ*”¹⁰—O gods, may we hear well with our ears, let us not hear with books; “*bhadram paśyemākṣabhir yajatrāḥ*”¹¹—O honourable ones, may we see well through our eyes and not through the words of others. May the National School free us of the boundaries of timid and rote learning and imbibe our shackled intellect with open strength and individuality. May we not be ashamed of any words of ours that do not correspond with the books. In fact, we will not even be shy of being wrong because he who does not have the right to err has not received the right to discover. It is much better to err via one’s own efforts than to memorize a hundred errors made by another. That is because the effort that

⁸ Maitreyi was a female philosopher who lived in ancient India during the later Vedic period. Her mention can be found in the Vedas. She was called *Brahmajnani* or the possessor of *Brahmajnan*, the ultimate knowledge of the universe.

⁹ Maitreyi famously stated, “*yenāhaṃ nāmṛtā syāṃ kimahaṃ tena kuryām?*”, or “What would I do with that which would not render me immortal?” signifying that worldly and material possessions do not lead to attainment of the divine nectar that makes the drinker immortal and thus they are futile.

¹⁰ This is a peace invocation that can be found in the Atharva Veda.

¹¹ The source of this line is Rig Veda.

causes error also leads to us beyond errors. Whatever or however be it, education would fulfil our own selves—we would not become phonographs of English lectures or a shackled pet parrot of a foreign professor—with such sincere reassurance in my heart, I bow today before our newly-established temple of education. May the students derive not only learning from it, but also the knowledge of how to respect, devote and strengthen themselves—may they learn to be fearless—may they realise their own selves—may they realize within their very bones:

“*sarvaṃ paravaśaṃ duḥkhaṃ sarvamātmavaśaṃ sukhaṃ*”¹²

May this great mantra ever reverberate within themselves:

“*bhūmaiva sukham, nālpe sukhamasti*”¹³

That which is *bhuma*, which is great, is *sukh* or pleasure; there is no pleasure to be had in less.

In the ancient *tapovans* of India, the mantra via which the *Brahmavidya*-learned¹⁴ guru had called upon the students has not rung across this country for ages. Today our school stands in the place of that guru and is sending its clarion call across the banks of the Brahmaputra and Bhagirathi:

“*yathā"paḥ pravatā"yanti yathā māsā aharjaram,*”

and

“*evaṃ māṃ brahmacāriṇaḥ dhātarāyantu sarvataḥ svāhā*”¹⁵

The way in which all waters flow downwards—the way in which all months run across the year—similarly, let the *brahmacharis* from all directions come to me--*swāha*.⁸

“*saha vīryaṃ karavāvahai*”¹⁶

May we all unite to express strength.

¹² This line is from *Manusmriti*.

¹³ Brahma Sutra, 1.3.9.

¹⁴ One who has gleaned the true knowledge about Brahma through his study of Vedas and Upanishads.

¹⁵ Taittiriya Upanishad, 1.4.

¹⁶ Ibid, 3.1.

“tejasvi nāvadhītamastu”¹⁷

Let our lessons be carried out with strength of spirit.

“mā vidviṣāvahai”¹⁸

May we not feel envy towards each other.

“bhadraṃ no api vātaya manaḥ”¹⁹

O God, let our minds run speedily towards good.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Rig Veda, 10.20.1.

AFTER THE VACATION¹

We have all gathered here again after the vacation. From time to time, we take such breaks from our work not to disconnect from that work but as a way of refreshing the connection with the work.

We cannot comprehend the actual significance of the work if we do not sometimes distance ourselves from the field of work. If we remain engrossed relentlessly within work, it results in only seeing work. The work then ensnares us from all sides like a spider's web and we are rendered powerless to understand the real purpose of the work. So, in order to gain the opportunity of freshly viewing the familiar work, we sometimes remove ourselves away from it. The purpose of this is not simply to rest the tired faculties.

We should not concentrate only upon the work. Rather, we should also look at the worker. We cannot spend all our days with soot-blackened face like a porter or worker toiling in this factory amidst the harsh din of its engines and the immense heat of fire. If we can once, at the end of the day, bathe, don fresh clothes, and visit the owner of the factory, then only can we connect ourselves personally to the work and thus evade the absolute authority of machines—then only can there be joy in our work. Or else, as we keep turning the wheels of the machine, we too become parts of the machine.

Today, at the end of the vacation, we have again reached our work-arena. Are we not viewing the work now with fresh eyes? The innate truth of this work had become dull to us under the friction of habituality; are we not feeling happy to see its brilliance again?

What is this joy for? Is it because of seeing the embodiment of success in front of us? Is it because of the thought that we have created what we had wanted to create? Is it the joy of feeling pride in our own achievement?

No, it is not so. If man regards work as the ultimate and remains thoroughly immersed in it, he feels the pride of the power of the self. But when we perceive the truth underlying work, we see that which is much greater than work itself. Then, just as our egos are driven away and our

¹ “*Chhutir Par*”, (it was delivered as a lecture at the Brahmacharyashram at 1909 and first published as a part of *Rabindra Rachanabali* in 1938-39.)

heads bowed down in reverence, on the other hand, joy too balloons up within our hearts. Then we can see our joyous Lord and not the gloating of the iron machine.

There is an effort for welfare in this school of ours. Is this merely a machine for welfare? Simply driven by rules? Is its job merely to teach language, maths—toil and drive the other to toil? Is there the feeling of having attaining great results from establishing a big school? No, it is not so.

It would be insubstantial to regard this effort as something huge or the result as a highly significant one. There is no doubt that there occur the fruits of welfare from welfare work but those fruits are merely secondary. The primary fact is that through welfare work, the appearance of divinity becomes clearer to us. If we fix our sights at the right spot, we can see the welfare of the world overriding the welfare work. Therein lies the ultimate success of welfare work. Welfare work is an endeavour to view that Great Worker of the universe. He who is idle cannot view Him. He who has no enterprise would find His appearance blurry within his mind. That is why there exists work, otherwise the glory of work cannot lie within the work itself.

If we know it within ourselves that this work is an endeavour to attain the merciful Great Worker of the universe, then all the obstacles and shortcomings related to work cannot cause disappointment in us. That is because it is a part of our endeavour to overcome hurdles. If there be no hurdle, then our endeavour itself would be incomplete. Then we are no longer rendered distraught with the fear of the work being destroyed at the mere sight of obstacles because we know that there are greater fruits than the fruits of the work. It would not do to prepare ourselves to fight the obstacles in order to win; actually, we do not know if we would win. But the struggle against obstacles eats away at the hurdles within our own selves and through that the strength of our spirit is liberated from the layers of ash, and burns through bright. And in that brilliance, the emergence of the One Who is manifest in the world becomes freer in our minds. Take joy in the fact there are obstacles in the path of working. Take joy from the fact that if you try to work, you will face obstacles from all sides and what you had imagined would be defeated again and again. Take joy from the fact that people would misunderstand you and insult you. Take joy from the fact that the salary you hoped for would be denied to you repeatedly. That is because in it lies the endeavour. For he who wants to light a fire—would it do to lament at the burning of wood? Forget about the one who wants to simply hoard dry wood. After the vacation, we are entering with joy

all the obstacles and all the shortcomings and incompleteness of work. Who are we inspired by? The one who presides over work.

If we look at Him, we gain more strength to work but arrogance goes away. We do not see the effort in effort but the evidence of His peaceful appearance. Work goes on but there descends silence; like during full tide, it rings with silence everywhere. All shouting, calling, announcing vanish away. There remains no excess in thoughts, speech or actions. Power conceals its own self and emerges as beauty—just like the beauty of the stars in today’s evening sky. Their immense strength, extreme speed and dangerous energy have all been translated into what gentle smiles—what complete peace! We too would soften our arrogant efforts by following the example of the peaceful and greatly beautiful aspect of that extreme strength enshrined in our work. We would overwhelm the extreme regret of work with that beauty. Our work— “*madhu dyaur,*” *madhuna* *naktam, madhumat pāṛthivaṃ rajah*”²—would blend with all of this and become full of sweetness.

² Rig Veda, 1.90.7. The line can be translated as – “May night and morning be sweet; may the region of the earth be full of sweetness; may the protecting heaven be sweet to us.”

WOMEN'S EDUCATION¹

We have received a letter from Srimati Leela Mitra regarding women's education which merits discussion. The letter says—

A group of people proclaim that there is no need for women's education because if women are educated, men would be inconvenienced in many ways. Educated women do not regard husbands as gods; they do not concentrate upon serving the husband, rather, their entire attention remains on studies etc.

There is another group that states that women's education is essential because, we, the men, are educated and if the ones with whom we would spend our domestic lives have no understanding of our thoughts, ideals, wishes and hopes, then the joy of family life would be hampered.

Both the groups are judging women's education from their own perspectives. That women, like me, have their own personality—they are not created for the sake of others—there is a meaning of their own lives—is not acknowledged by either the supporters or detractors of women's education. The lawyers actually advocate on their own behalf. At the end of the case, strangely enough, no one thinks of the ones whose actual interest it is.

I fail to understand that if education be a path to attaining humanity and if the right to education be an innate right of human beings, what moral excuse can be posited to deprive women of that right?

On the other hand, the ones who have decided that women have been created for their sake, wish to keep such little leftover of education for women that it does not suffice to adequately nurture the humanity of women.

¹ “*Strishiksha*”, August-September 1915.

The ones who are ready to provide equal help in education to both men and women do not belong to the category of regular men; they belong to a much higher position and thus they should be regarded as an exception.

Therefore, the ones whose need it is, must directly involve themselves with the work. If we do not liberate ourselves by the dint of our own undertaking and ability, then no one else can set us free. What the others posit as freedom, are only trappings in another form. The mould that men have created for women's education is simply the mould of making dolls fit for men to play with.

But the woman who would engage in this task cannot possibly be a conventional woman. She would not regard that which society regards as happiness as her ideal. She would have to bear in mind that her ultimate fulfilment does not lie in bearing children. She is not an ordinary woman who is sheltered by men and who clings to men with all her shyness and fear; rather, she would be a true partner by virtue of becoming a helpmeet during crisis, a part-taker in difficult thinking and a companion during both sorrow and joy.

I accept the main idea of this letter. All that is worthy of knowing is knowledge and both men and women must know that—not only for the sake of applying that knowledge but simply for the sake of knowing.

Human beings seek to know; that is one's dharma. That is why all the necessary and unnecessary facts of the world have become learning for him. It is needless to say that if we do not feed that desire for knowledge or delude it by providing bad food, then we render his human nature weak.

But that we would facilitate man into fully becoming a human is not something entirely believed by all of us. When there arises the proposal of educating the general populace, a section of educated people ask if it be so, then where would they get their servants from? Perhaps witty people would soon write farces where we would see that the gentleman's valet is busy writing poetry or making huge calculations in order to understand the working of the stars and, fearful of disturbing him, the gentleman is not daring to summon him for assistance in his toilet. The same

principle applies to women; if they get educated, then sweeping, chopping and cooking falls to the lot of gentlemen.

However, the logic behind their argument is that female nature itself is different. But if it indeed be so, then what are they afraid of? I consider the world to be flat but it is round—the masculinity of men is not hampered by this knowledge. Likewise, if the femininity of women is ruined by the news that the world does not rest upon the head of Vasuki², then women are not actually women; we have made them women by shaping them in the mould of ignorance.

One day God created man as man and woman as woman; this is an extraordinary invention of God—this fact is acknowledged by everyone from poets to biologists. This difference in the world of nature has been the source of immense power and great joy. I do not accept that the schoolmaster or the textbook committee can block the source of this power and joy by their burden of exercise books or readable or unreadable books. All in all, between God and the schoolmaster, I believe in God more. Thus, it is my belief that even if women study Kant and Hegel, they would still love children and not entirely dismiss men.

But it would be disregarding God if we do not keep any distinction in the modes of educating men and women. Education has two aspects. One is of pure knowledge while the other is of application. There is no difference between men and women in the arena of pure knowledge but there is indeed a difference when it comes to application. In order for women to become true human beings, the learning of pure knowledge is needed but where is the harm in accepting the special need of behavioural knowledge to help women become women?

The nature of women's body and mind is different from men's and that is why their behavioural sphere is separate from that of men. But at present, under the fiery influence of rebellion, a group of women are disavowing this basic fact. They say that the behavioural sphere of women is completely the same as that of men.

² According to Hindu mythology, Vasuki is the king of serpents and supports the weight of the world on his immense hood.

But this is entirely stemming from their distress. The cause of the distress is that men have achieved authority in various spheres of the world but the sphere where women's actions lie, there they have been compelled to be compliant of men. They do not consider this compliance as inevitable.

They say that men have, for all this time, forced this burden on women. If this be true for all this time everywhere in the world—if the power of men has gone against women's nature in order to force them to the lowest level of society, then we have to say that slavery is natural to women. Slavery here means being compelled to carry the burden of others against one's own wishes. Those to whom this is not natural would die rather than tolerate such abuse.

If the fact that slavery is natural to women be proved true to human history, then the shame of that one half of the world would have caused the entire world to cast its face down. But I say that this defamation about their own sex propagated by women is entirely false.

The truth is that it is female nature to be a mother and to be a wife—not to be a slave. The female nature has a greater share of love—or else children would not have been reared nor would domestic life have prospered. The mother takes care of the child because she has affection—not because of the burden of responsibility; it is because of love that the wife tends to the husband; there is no burden of responsibility in that.

The burden of responsibility can be seen where the relations of love and affection are not natural. If all wives had been able to naturally love all the husbands then there would have been no problem. But that is not possible. However, as long as there is this thing called society, human beings have to abide by a code in numerous matters and to a considerable extent.

But while creating the code, society follows innate nature. Society has automatically assumed about women that love comes naturally to them. That is why the code of love applies to women. Society thus demands of women that they act in such a way as if they love the familial space. They would tend to father, mother, brother, sister, husband and children. Their duty is the duty of love and that is their ideal.

Thus even when there is no love, be it for whatever reason, in the domestic life of a woman, society judges the woman against the ideal of love. The behaviour of the wife who has been unable

to love her husband is also measured by the yardstick of love. Whether she loves domestic life or not, there is this one touchstone to evaluate her behaviour—the touchstone of love.

The very dharma of love is self-surrender, therefore is glory lies in that very surrender. That which is being shunned as compliance is worthy of being shunned only where it is not love but a burden of responsibility. Women have, by the dint of their own nature, received such a place in society where they have surrendered themselves to domestic life. If, for some reason, a state in society occurs where the self-surrender is detached greatly from the ideal of love, then it becomes a cause of suffering and insult for women.

Women love naturally and sincere self-surrender has been deeply inculcated within them by the idealization practised by society; many selfish men take advantage of this and ill-treat women. Where masculinity has deviated away from the ideal of true masculinity, there women keep suffering and being deprived by their own high ideal—I very much doubt whether any other country has as many instances of this as our country does. But that cannot dismiss the fact that the behavioural space that women have occupied is somewhere they themselves have naturally reached and they have not been compelled by any external force.

We have to bear in mind that in society, the slavery of men occurs no less than that of women; rather, it occurs more. In spite of endeavouring to be civilized, human society still runs on slave labour. Very few people in this society enjoy true freedom. Be it in statecraft, in business or in every aspect of society, groups of slaves are toiling their hardest in order to drag the juggernaut of the Jagannath³ who goes by the name of society. They know not where they are dragging the chariot nor whose it is. For days through their entire lives they are carrying such a burden that has no love or beauty. Three-fourths of this burden is on the shoulders of men. Society has stressed women's love and thus women's burden is that of love. It is the strength of men that society has emphasized; thus men's burden is that of strength. Circumstances increase the burden to such an extent where love is tortured and strength is weakened. Then comes the need to reform society. That reform is now causing pain across the entire human society. But however much the reforms may be, they cannot reach the roots of civilization, and the poets can finally rejoice that

³ The idol the Hindu god Jagannath (along with those of his brother, Balaram, and sister, Subhadra) is taken out for a public chariot procession every year during the month of Asadh (during July or August) as per the Oriya calendar.

men would be men and women would remain women, thereby continuing to be his “true partner by virtue of becoming a helpmeet during crisis, a part-taker in difficult thinking and a companion during both sorrow and joy.”

EXTRACT FROM *THE FORM AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASHRAM* (III)¹

... My financial resources were indeed limited and I had no experience about the workings of a school. I was making a few arrangements as per my ability and talks were ongoing with various people in this regard – thus was the foundation being built in obscurity. During those days I met a young man whom one could well regard as a boy. Perhaps he had just crossed the age of eighteen and stepped on the threshold of nineteen. His name was Satishchandra Ray; he was a B. A. student. His friend Ajit Kumar Chakravarty had handed me the notebook of his poems shortly before. As I read them, I was left with no doubt that the boy not only had the ability to write but had talent as well. After a few days, Satish came to me accompanied by his friend. Calm, polite, a man of few words – one was naturally attracted to him. As I evaluated him to be a strong person, I did not hesitate to clearly point out the areas of slackness in his composition. I discussed, with him, rhyming in particular in relation to each line of his writing. Ajit was disturbed by my stern evaluation but Satish was able to accept it easily and respectfully. I was struck with wonder at what was revealed of Satish’s character in the course of merely a few days. His knowledge and appreciation of literature was just as deep as it was wide. It was rare the way he had internalized Browning’s poetry. His command over the writings of Shakespeare equalled his joy at experiencing them. I firmly believed that a bold and dramatic tone would characterize his poetry and by dint of that, he would set up a new direction in Bengali literature. I had observed a rare feature in his character that even though he was young, he had no blind attachment to his own writings. He could evaluate them from a distance and found it quite easy to discard them

¹ This essay was first delivered as a lecture titled “*Āśram Bidyālayēr Sūcanā*” at Santiniketan. It was published in the Bengali literary magazine *Prabasi* edited by Ramananda Chatterjee in September 1933. It became part of a book publication for the first time in 1989 when it was included in volume 14 of *Rabindra Rachanabali* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati) as the third essay of “*Ashramer Rup O Bikash.*”

mercilessly. So I had found no trace of the writings of that day even shortly afterwards. It is evident from this that his poetic character was marked by the quality of objectivity. He had enough ability to analyze and to conceptualize but the aspect of his character that strongly drew me to him was the sensitive awareness of his mind. He had no indifference to the world he was born in. He came to the world bearing the ability to extend his right everywhere by dint of simultaneously enjoying it and giving it up. I remember saying to him one day, “You are Kavi Bhartṛihari;² in this world you are both a king as well as an ascetic.”

At that time, my mind was constantly occupied with planning for Santiniketan. Discussions about it flew between my new-found young friend and I. With the meditative vision that was natural to him, he could clearly visualize all of it. He had tried to capture it in the story of Utanka that he had wrote.

Ultimately he could not control the enthusiasm born from joy. He said, “Include me in your work.” I was delighted but I did not agree in any way at that time. I knew that economically they were badly off. No doubt his guardians wished for him to take care of the family by acquiring a B. A. degree and sitting for the bar examination later on. I stalled him temporarily at that time.

It was then that my familiarity grew with BrahmabandhabUpadhyaya. My poems of *Naibedyā* had been published shortly before. Those poems were a firm favourite of his. The appreciation for those poems that he expressed in his self-edited journal *Twentieth Century* was the kind of generous appreciation that I had received nowhere else during that period. Actually, the kind of respect that I got from the English translations of some of these poems along with some poems of similar nature from *Kheya* and *Gitanjali*, was something that he had already bestowed on me back then. It was in relation to this that he got acquainted with me and got to know that I had received my father’s permission to establish a school at Santiniketan. He said to me, “There is no need to delay the realization of this resolution.” He started working for the ashram along with a few devoted followers and students of his. At that time, from my side, Rathindranath and his younger brother Shamindranath were students of the ashram.³ He added a few more to them. Had

² Bhartṛihari was a Sanskrit writer of India in the 5th century. He is particularly famous for having composed two texts – one about Sanskrit grammar and linguistics while the other is a book of poems.

³ The sons of Rabindranath Tagore.

the number not been limited, the completeness of the school would have been impossible. The reason is that, according to the ancient ideal, my opinion was that, regarding the matter of education, the relation between the guru and the student should be spiritual. The significance was that imparting education was the principal part of the guru's sadhana or endeavour. He who has received the wealth of knowledge is responsible for selflessly distributing that wealth. This great responsibility has been acknowledged by our society up to modern times. It is now disappearing gradually

The few students with whom the school started were not needed to pay any fee or cost of meals; I accepted almost all responsibility of their living with my limited means only. Had the maximum share of teaching not been accepted by Upadhyaya and Sri Rewa Chand – his present title is Animananda – it would have been entirely impossible for the school to function. The title of “Gurudev” that Upadhyaya had given me then, is something that I am having to carry till date in my relation with the ashramites. The way that the financial burden of the ashram has been difficult for me to shoulder from the moment of its inception for a long time to come – similarly has been the weight of the title. Financial troubles and this title – neither is easy for me to carry but both burdens have been placed on my shoulders by fate and as the gift of fate, I have no hope of escaping this sorrow and suffering.

I have elaborated the fundamental facts of the starting of the Santiniketan school. Alongside them, I acknowledge my unreturnable gratitude towards Upadhyaya.⁴ Following that, let me also finish the tale of the poet-youth Satish.

The B. A. examination was forthcoming. Professors were expecting great things from him. Precisely then, he did not sit for the examination. He was afraid of passing it. If he passed, the responsibility of the family would fall squarely on his shoulders and fearing that it would be impossible for him to free himself from its torment and temptation, he backed away at the final hour. Where the family is concerned, he laid the foundation of a great tragedy. Whenever I had tried to ease their financial crisis in some measure, I could never make him agree to it. Sometimes

⁴ Some people have written that Upadhyay and Rewa Chand were Christians and my father objected to it. This is not true. I know it myself that some relative of ours complained to him about this issue. His only reply was, “Do not be worried. There is no such fear about Santiniketan. I have established ‘*śāntam śivamadvaitama*’ over there.” (Footnote by Tagore)

I had sent some money to his house in secrecy. But the amount was nominal. During that time, almost all my saleable possessions had been exhausted – they included resources both from the inner and outer quarters of my family. I had given the royalties of a few of my popular books to some people for a limited time. The complex and unfathomable nature of calculations had rendered the limited time into a very long time. Tempted by the prospect of living by the seaside, I had built a house at Puri. Before it could be enjoyed for even a single day, it had to be sold to slake the thirst of the ashram. What was left afterwards was the credit of borrowing at a high interest. Even after knowing everything, Satish plunged himself happily into the limitless poverty of the ashram. But there was no limit to his joy – the joy of the proximity with nature over here, the joy of literature, the joy of self-surrender at every hour.

He inspired this limitless joy in his pupils. I remember so many times that I walked up and down Salbithi⁵ discussing varied theories with him – it grew late into the night – the whole of the ashram felt silent in its deep slumber. ...

... My seventy years of experience testify to how such unadulterated reverence, unwavering and sincere affection, such cordiality that is ready to shoulder every burden and give up everything, is hard to come by. That is why I have not been able to forget the pain of the untimely death of my young friend.

In this writing I have merely touched upon the first resolution – taken long back – about the ashram school, its sorrows, joys, its poverty and fullness, its favourite company, its separation from them, cruel opposition and help that was unasked for. Moreover, it is not only our wish but the very nature of time that is working on it. It has brought so many changes, so many new hopes and failures, the unimaginable self-surrender of so many friends, the unreasonable antagonism of so many opponents, so many lies, criticism and appreciation, so much of arduous troubles – both material and spiritual. Whether I receive remuneration for it or not, I have caused self-harm to my absolute capacity – finally the day when, with a weary body and broken health, I have to take my leave is here – I make my final bow to the one who has guided me through the long, hard and difficult path. The failures of the long years of sadhana are evident on the surface; the full evidence of its success remains hidden in the invisible letters of unwritten history.

⁵ “avenue of sal” trees, a central path in the ashram

THE EDUCATION OF THE ASHRAM¹

It is not easy today to historically conceptualize the actual form of the *tapovan* of ancient India. The reflection of *tapovan* that has become eternalized in the heart and literature of India is an imaginary vision of benevolence—an embodiment of lively joy devoid of luxury and mortal attachments.

I have been born in modern times. But this image has lingered in my mind as well. Once there arose an eagerness within me to actualize within the school of the present that ideal of the *tapovan*.

Within my mind, I have envisioned the Guru or the Teacher at the heart of the *tapovan*. He is not a machine, rather, he is human—not passively but actively; that is because he is engaged in attaining the goal of humanity. It is a part of his own endeavour to infuse the flowing stream of this enterprise within the mind of his disciple. The life of the disciple draws inspiration from his immediate accompaniment. The most valuable ingredient of the education system of the ashram is this accompaniment of the ever-awakened human mind. That value lies not in the subjects taught, nor in the amenities and the *processes*. The mind of the Guru finds itself at every moment and thus in turn gives itself. The joy of receiving proves its truth by the joy of giving.

Once I had lived in the home of a Japanese gentleman. His special interest lay in gardening. He was a Buddhist, a worshipper of peace. He used to say, “I love trees. The power of that love enters the leaves and the response to that love blooms in their flowers and fruits.” Needless to say, this statement is completely true for the gardener of the human mind. When the mind truly mingles with other minds, joy is born automatically. That joy is creative in nature. The imparting of education practised in the ashram is the imparting of this joy. Those who have the sense of duty but not of joy have a different path. I have regarded the natural relation of mutuality within the Guru and the disciple as the main medium of imparting education.

I bore one more thought—the Guru, the child within whom had entirely withered away, is unfit to take the responsibility of the boys. There needs to be not only immediacy between the two but also

¹ “*Ashramer Shiksha*”, June 1936.

mutual compatibility and similarity or else there exists no human connection in that interaction. If I am to compare the ideal teacher with a river, then I would say that the river is rendered complete not simply by the addition of age-old tributaries; its primordial torrent of fountain water has not lost itself amidst the huge boulders. He who is a natural teacher responds to the call of the boys and the boy within him spontaneously comes out. Through his heavy voice is revealed the spring of lively young laughter. If the boys are unable to recognize him from any side as one of them, if they think “the man seems like a gigantic prehistoric creature,” then they would never be able to reach out to him. Generally, our teachers are always eager to establish their maturity, meaning their distance from youthfulness; mostly it is because of the temptation of ruling the roost. They remain alert as they fear losing respect if they venture out among the boys without an usher. With them there echoes, “Silence! Silence!”, thereby obstructing the natural connection between aged and young branches to give birth to flowers and fruits—thereby silencing the liveliness within the hearts of the boys.

There is one more thing to be said. Boys are very close to nature. They do not seek to lounge on couches; whenever opportunity presents itself, they seek to take their holiday on the branches of trees. The primordial stream of life courses through the veins of great and wide nature. That flow induces vitality within the life-force of the boys. As long as they are not overcome by the habits imposed upon them by the disciplining of elders, they strive to free themselves of the trap of artificiality. The forest-dwelling sages had that eternal child within their soul. That is why, without having reference to any scientific proof, they had stated, all of this has issued forth from life and is strumming with life. Is this the statement of Bergson?² It is the statement of the great child. Let the beating heart of the universe touch the mind and body of the boys—away from the dumb and dead walls of the city.

Then comes the matter of the daily life of the ashram. A description from *Kādamvari*³ comes to mind—evening comes on the *tapovan* like the red-hued holy cow returning to the shed. It makes one feel that cow-grazing, milking of cows, gathering of firewood and grass,⁴ tending to

² French philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson.

³ A romantic novel in Sanskrit composed by Banabhatta in the first half of the 7th century CE.

⁴ Firewood and grass were used in performing the holy rites of *yajna* or sacrificial fire.

guests, creating the altar for sacrificial fire—were all parts of the daily duties of the girls and boys of the ashram. Through these series of actions, the flow of their daily lives mingled ceaselessly with the *tapovan*. Through the spreading of cooperation and friendship, the ashram became, at every moment, a creation of the ashram-dwellers themselves. I wish for this ever-enterprising spirit of working cooperation in our ashram.

Wherever there is stiffness in human nature, daily life becomes ugly and stained. The barbarism of one's nature there gets an unimpeded chance of revealing itself. In privileged society, in spite of the shortcoming of inner strength, this lack is concealed by the artifice of the excess of superficial items. This natural darkness is perceivable in our country almost everywhere when one looks at the difference between the outer and inner quarters of rich houses.

It is necessary to naturalize the practice of awareness and responsibility of cohabitation by making one's surroundings beautiful, organized and hygienic through one's own efforts. The negligence of one can be the cause of the other's inconvenience, ill health and harm—this realization forms the foundation of civil society. Generally the lack of this awareness is always perceivable in the households of our country.

The principal opportunity of ashram education is the regular creation of the awareness of the civil code of cooperation. In order to actualize the opportunity, it is necessary to reduce the burden of material objects in the first stage of education. The crudeness of the mind is exposed easily in an entirely materialistic nature. Beauty and organization are matters of the mind. Thus, it is necessary to set the mind free. Not only from idleness and inexpertise, but also from the greed of material objects. The joy of creative power becomes as pronouncedly true as it can be free from the shackles of materialistic excess. The self-enabling education that regulates the use of material objects right from childhood is highly neglected in our country. It is my desire that students learn to feel joy through the use of a small number of material objects—those that can be easily procured—and be constant in their endeavour to discover the joy of creation through those limited objects, alongside being responsible towards the duty of facilitating the health and convenience of people in general.

We consider it an inconvenient audacity when boys exercise self-authority on their environment and always repress it. This causes them to no longer feel ashamed of being dependent on others and increases their demands from others to the point that they feel strongly against the

beggar; they feel self-complacent in debating about the shortcomings in others. This shameful lack can be perceived everywhere. It is a must to be free from this.

I remember when I had a regular connection with the daily duties of the boys, a group of older boys complained to me that while serving meals, they needed to drag the heavy, food-laden vessels across the floor, which causes their bottoms to get eroded and also dirties the room. I said, “The grief is yours but you are looking at me for its redressal. The simple solution of attaching a *bide*⁵ at the bottom of the vessel in order to stop the friction does not occur to you. The only reason why you cannot think is because you have made up your mind that it is your lot to be passive receivers and the right of authority belongs to another. This cannot be conducive to self-esteem.”

It is good that there should be a shortage of material objects and dearth of means during the period of education. One must get used to having little. It spoils the boys when their minds are indulged by providing them easily with everything they want. It is not as if they naturally want all of it. It is we elders who impose our wants on them, thereby inducting them into the addiction for material objects. A holistic cultivation of the strength of mind and body is possible only where there is little help from external sources. There the urge of human creativity is easily awakened. In those whom it does not awaken, nature sweeps them away like garbage. The first sign of self-authority is creative authority. The only truly self-illuminated person is one who creates one’s own kingdom. The excessively pampered boys of our country are deprived of that cultivation of self-endeavour from the very beginning. Thus, we are as ready as wet earth to be moulded into categorical shapes in the firm hands of others.

There is one more thing to be stated in this regard. Owing to the body being slack by being in a hot tropical climate or due to some other reason, there is a serious lack of curiosity in our intellectual nature. I had once procured a windmill for pumping water from America. I had hoped that the boys would be interested in the mechanism of the immense turbine. But I observed that only a few boys really looked at it. They casually regarded it as something or other—not worthy of questioning.

⁵ *Bide* is a commonly-made resting receptacle for any heavy utensil like an earthen pitcher. It is woven out of coconut fibre.

The lack of curiosity is inner deadness. All the races that now influence the world have an unmitigated curiosity towards everything on earth. There is no such country, time or subject to which their minds are not directed. This lively mental force of theirs has emerged victorious everywhere.

I have already alluded to the fact that the education of the ashram is the education of living completely. It is perfectly possible to stand first in an examination with a dead mind and we see the testimony to that every day in our country. It is seen that excellent students of colleges win degrees but not the world. It was my resolution right from the beginning that the boys of the ashram would be always curious about their surroundings; they would search, experiment and collect. Such teachers would gather over here whose eyes are fixed beyond the limit of books; those who can truly see, those who search, those who are curious of the world and those who derive joy from direct knowledge.

Finally, I would speak of that which I regard as most important and that which is most rare. Only they are worthy of being teachers who have patience. Those who naturally have affection towards the boys are the ones to whom this patience is natural. The greatest danger about the teachers' own character is that the ones with whom they deal are not their equal in power. It is easily possible to be intolerant of them for slight or imaginary reasons, to mock them, insult them or punish them. Like the ones whose job it is to chastise the weaker other and who are prone to commit wrong even when they are themselves not aware of it—this is no different. Those who have no real worthiness to exercise power have not only no compunction in being unjust towards the powerless, rather, they take pleasure from it. Boys come to their mother's lap with all their powerlessness and thus their chief safeguard is their mother's limitless affection. Despite that, intolerance and exalted sense of power supersedes affection and leads to unjust chastisement of the boys—the proof of it can be found in every other household. (refer to Chhuti) Wherever we see instances of boys being given hard or extreme punishment, often in those cases, it is the teachers who are responsible. It is because they are weak at heart that they try to make their duty easier by means of being harsh.

Whether it be in statecraft or in the craft of education, harsh ruling is the testimony of the ruler's unworthiness. *Saktasya bhushanam kshamā*.⁶ Where forgiveness is weak, there power itself is weak.

⁶ Sanskrit: literally, "Forgiveness is the jewel of power."

THE IDEAL OF EDUCATION¹

I have roamed over various countries. But even from afar, I have pondered over and tried to understand in this programme, the foundation of that which I have established. Today it is necessary to speak about it in front of everyone.

There was the urge of a temporary requirement behind the system of education prevalent in our country. Owing to the contact with foreigners, arrangements were made for the learning of their language and training for the supply of workers. The foundation or the purpose of it was neither so great nor so high that it could establish the entire country and race upon a lofty ideal.

The main target of all the arrangements of learning in our country is to seek and enable a placement in the factory of the government; and we strive for this very education. This education has rendered our minds narrow and weak. Whereas knowledge frees the mind, this knowledgeless education has enforced our selfish inclinations. The only attempt of this education is to make the student pass, to make him a clerk and not to develop humanity.

At present, many countries have risen to great heights in various ways and are contributing a lot to the world. Even newly awakened Japan is obliging the world by contributing a tribute of scientific learning. But all we are supplying are clerks and deputies and police officers. That is because there is no foundation of proper education in the programmes of our learning.

In other countries there is a huge role played by education. There exists a connection between the entire country and learning. In our country, there has been an obstruction to that right from the onset. Selfishness and materialistic tendencies have demeaned our endeavour of learning and rendered it narrow—it has been put in chains. The learning acquired by a student is based on his sense of selfishness. They have not learnt to follow any great ideal. The learning they acquire has value only in the market but has no sense of humanity underpinning it.

¹ “*Shikshar Adarsha*”, published in magazine *Muktadhara* Vol. 1, nos. 3 & 4, Baisakh & Jaishtha 1338 (April-May 1931). It is not included within *Rabindra Rachanabali* as published by Visva-Bharati.

In ancient times, there was a great endeavour for knowledge. Its ideal was to provide shape to the entire life. *Gār'hashtya*, *vānaprastha* and *brahmacarya*² were all parts of this endeavour and learning was also included within it. Within this endeavour, we can perceive the revelation of the soul and the foundation of it is the power of invention within humanity. But at present, students are passing their examinations of M.A., B.A., and alongside are learning to neglect the innermost goal of education of our country. It is my desire that there should be present, within the root of educational endeavour over here, the appeal of the innermost soul. Dharma is the main role of human life. But the entire country has inflicted an attack on its deepest dharma by dint of aimless education. In the western continents, there has prevailed an effort to separate the burden of idiocy from dharma, and only we are trying to embrace it to our hearts. The ideal of this ashram is the ideal of *tapovan*. I had spread the seat at the site of this great expanse with the goal that the students could fulfil their duty towards life with pure hearts, maintaining ties of love and respect with each other, and could awaken a sense of innate respect for all that is good and true. I had the desire in my heart that the boys would make self-control the main part of their lives and be respectful. In my opinion, the learning of science, geography or history comes secondary. But perhaps we have lost sight of that fundamental ideal of the school; many obstacles have arisen from various sides with regard to this. It is natural that there would occur conflicts between the endeavour prevalent over here and the minds of those who have entered here from the atmosphere of various movements going on in the world at large. Consequently, there arises the threat that this ashram would slowly transform into just a regular school; it becomes highly difficult to maintain its foundation. I fear that those who are unable to properly comprehend the purpose of this programme would distort this sole and dearest ashram of mine and the fear of it pains me.

² During the Vedic period, the social custom of dividing man's life into four stages was initiated. They were i) *brahmacarya*, ii) *gār'hashtya*, iii) *vānaprastha* and iv) *saṁnyāsa*. *Brahmacarya* was the first stage of Vedic life where a boy was expected to devote himself to education and the service of the guru. He also had to maintain the strict practice of abstinence. *Gār'hashtya* was the stage of family life. *Vānaprastha* signified retired life, literally "going to the forest". *Samnyāsa* was the stage of the renunciation of the world.

According to the scriptures—knowledge is higher than habit. The actions we commit blindly are enlightened by knowledge. It leads to the purification of the soul and bends the devotion of the mind towards truth. Furthermore, meditation is greater than knowledge. It is possible to imbibe all knowledge within oneself through the endeavour of meditation. This school is supposed to establish the connection between knowledge and meditation. If the meditation is successful, then all our efforts and actions would succeed as well.

According to the scriptures, greater than meditation is the effort to work without hoping to gain any fruits. If we can dedicate all our actions to the actions of the One who is the Great Worker of the world, with the knowledge that we are joining in His work, then only would our work be sanctified. Let our work not be obscured by the darkness of ego and narrowness of mind—let our habits develop so that we can devote ourselves to all actions of the Great One—let the Great Truth rescue us from the deviation into falsehood that our ashram has dwindled into.

CONCLUSION

The chief aim that this dissertation has attempted to fulfill is an in-depth, analytical and holistic study of Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of school education with reference to Tagore's essays on school education, fictional prose, poetry, drama alongside a memorial reconstruction of life at Tagore's school Brahmacharyashram or Brahmavidyalaya in order to establish how the latter reflected the Tagorean philosophy. Simultaneously, the translation of selected Tagore's essay specifically on the topic of school education is intended to another layer of interpretation and significance to this process.

While Tagore, in his writing, repeatedly mentions that his philosophy of school education is influenced by the Vedic model, nowhere does he write specifically about the sources that he has been inspired by. Thus, this dissertation has attempted a close reading of the pertinent sections of Atharva Veda which is the oldest Vedic text detailing the education system of the time. By analyzing and contextualizing specific slokas alongside critical commentaries by scholars, the thesis has provided a concrete idea of what exactly the Vedic model - that formed the basis of Tagore's educational enterprise - comprised of. By studying the Vedic system and the Tagorean philosophy, as well as its implementation at his school, side by side, the dissertation has clearly delineated the extent to which Tagore followed the Vedic model and where he branched off to experiment with his own ideas.

The thesis has established that Tagore's educational enterprise was by no means a complete or thorough imitation of the Vedic system of education. Tagore's creative thinking, his deep understanding of the psychology of children and adolescents—as evident through both his essays as well as short stories—and his originality, together gave birth to an education system unique in its curriculum, approach to teaching, as well as the kind of spiritual orientation it gave to its students. The study of memorial accounts, anecdotes, letters clearly reveal that Brahmavidyalaya, which was an embodiment of Tagore's philosophy of school education, had multiple innovative practices like the self-government of its students, the incorporation of performing arts like theatre, dance and music as essential and non-optional components of school education. All of these were original additions by Tagore to the Vedic model that he had initially started his school on.

The employment of the memorial accounts, anecdotes, letters etc. as primary sources in historicizing the Brahmavidyalaya period has, by dint of its multivocality, allowed a nuanced understanding of the character of both Tagore's philosophy as well as his school at Santiniketan. These subjective accounts comprise of a rich source of history that allows the reader to both interpret and analyze what Tagore held as his ideal of school education. These alternate histories provide the reader with information that would otherwise not be attainable and thus deprive one of the opportunity of fully appreciating what Tagore has envisioned and how he had implemented that vision in the running of his school.

Tagore's education system was an alternate model posited directly against the colonial education system thereby claiming for itself a socio-political significance in the context of colonized India. It was a philosophy as well as a system that was directly aimed at evoking self-awareness and creating a knowledge about one's individual as well as social being. In doing so, Tagore moved the purpose of education away from the attainment of degrees and memorization of facts and figures. In the context of the present world with its emphatic eco-critical awareness, it is relevant that Tagore focused on the need of education to be closely interconnected with nature thereby attuning the learners with nature in such a way that they would develop a spontaneous respect and love for nature that would not depend on a course on Environmental Studies (as is the frequent case in the present education system of India).

Finally, the thesis has also analyzed Tagore's relationship with female education with particular reference to his essay "*Stri Shiksha*" (Female Education) and the rather scant history of the female section of the Brahmavidyalaya that is available to us. This relationship is a truly problematic one. Tagore, in spite of contributing greatly to the cause of female education, has revealed an attitude that is fraught with patriarchal overtones and an inability to see the female student as no different from a male one. While it is true that Tagore shocked the nation with his revolutionary plunge into co-educational system where male and female students studied together without any segregation, he also maintained that girls and boys are essentially so different that girls should be given additional learning that made them into girls. In summary, it can be said that Tagore gendered education whereby girls had to learn to fit into the societal role of being a female. Tagore position is, by no means, a completely patriarchal one as he proved the opposite in his life by bringing girls to the stage to perform in public as actors, dancers and musician. He celebrated

the voice of his female student in numerous such ways as has been discussed in this thesis. The thesis thus argues that Tagore's position was ambivalent when it came to female education and certainly problematic enough to attract the attention of the modern critic. To this, another factor that adds complexity, is the fact that Tagore always refers to the student in the Bengali essays as male. In the translations of those essays, this factor has been maintained; the translations also refer to the student as male and does not attempt to produce any gender-neutrality as that would erase this problematic aspect present quite prominently in Tagore's writing.

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