

SYNOPSIS OF PH.D. THESIS

**Title of the thesis: THE EDUCATIONAL MISSION OF RABINDRANATH
TAGORE**

**Name of the Ph.D. Candidate: Madhurima Neogi, Department of English,
Jadavpur University**

**Name of the Supervisor: Prof. (retd.) Ananda Lal, Department of English,
Jadavpur University**

Registration Number: A00EN1101014

Date of Registration: 15.07.2014

Synopsis:

As the focus of the thesis is exclusively on Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of school education, the Brahmavidyalaya period of Tagore's educational institution at Santiniketan, is central to the range and scope of this thesis. The thesis would be divided into two main parts. The first part of the thesis would involve two main elements. Firstly, it would seek to understand what constitutes Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of school education and how that philosophy is rooted in Tagore's inspiration from the Vedas. There would be an attempt to pinpoint which sources specifically, could have acted as Tagore's inspiration. To do so, the thesis would engage in a reading of the Vedas as well as the Buddhist Pitakas, as ancient India had very rich traditions of both Vedic education system as well as Buddhist education system. So, even though Tagore has 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 on him. It thereby makes it necessary to understand if Buddhist education system had an impact on Tagore's philosophy of school education. The thesis would also try to understand where Tagore's educational philosophy stands independent of the Vedic model and creates a character for itself that is uniquely of Tagore's own creation.

For a thorough understanding of Tagore's philosophy of school education, the thesis analyzes Tagore's essays, letters and lectures delivered upon different occasions. It demonstrates how Tagore established the sheer futility of the "knowledge" derived from the mechanical learning practiced in the colonial school and how that had become a meaningless burden for Indian students rather than fortifying their intellect or characters in any way whatsoever. Tagore pinpointed the root cause of this soul-consuming practice of education and posited an alternate system of school education. The thesis analyzes the Tagorean system with particular focus on its various aspects like the curriculum, the environment, the ideal teacher for implementation of the system along with the characteristics and values that the system was based upon.

In order to understand the unique character of Tagore's educational philosophy, it is necessary to understand the daily operations of his school. As stated earlier, Tagore's philosophy of school education runs hand in hand with the way his school functioned. The functioning of Brahmavidyalaya helps one to understand Tagore's philosophy of school education 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 thesis creates a memorial reconstruction of life at the Brahmavidyalaya involving all its stakeholders in order to understand the philosophy driving it as well as the practical implementation of the ideas about school education that Tagore is proposing in his numerous essays on school education. The memorial reconstruction uses the numerous memorial accounts by students, teachers and parents of students at Brahmavidyalaya as their source material.

The second part of the thesis consists of translations of selected essays by Tagore that focus on the subject of school education. Translation being a tool of interpretation in itself, an up-to-date translation of this essays would add critical value to complete the understanding of Tagore's philosophy of school education.

Accordingly, the chapters are mapped out in the following way:

CHAPTER ONE - *INTRODUCTION*

The first chapter introduces the subject matter of the dissertation and establishes it by means of posing the research question. The main objective of the thesis is to distil Tagore's philosophy of school education as can be found in the multiple essays written by him. Tagore left no single tract or treatise on the topic of school education. Thus, it becomes necessary to draw a cohesive understanding not only from the essays, but also from the fictional prose, poetry and drama produced by Tagore. Alongside this, the varied memoirs, anecdotes left behind by students, teachers, parents of students who attended Tagore's Brahmacharyashram are used to create a memorial reconstruction of regular life at the ashram. This subjective history allows one to understand how Tagore's principles were put into practice, their efficacy and how his ideas were interpreted by their actualization in the daily running of his school.

Another significant area of inquiry is what Tagore's attitude and approach was to female education. The thesis would question whether Tagore's education system was discriminatory in any sense or if it treated students, irrespective of male or female, alike. This topic is rather difficult to approach from the perspective of memorial accounts as there survive no first-hand memorial

account of the students from the female section of Brahmavidyalaya nor has any teacher left behind such an account. There are some secondary sources like memorial accounts by female students of the Visva Bharati period who describe the female section of the Brahmavidyalaya as described to them by those who witnessed that time. This thesis would use the memorial account of Amita Sen, a student of Tagore's school once it had expanded into Visva Bharati.

The thesis interrogates and analyzes the nature of Tagore's education system and question how his education system becomes a medium of resisting ideological colonization. It is in the context of the colonial education system that Rabindranath Tagore posited a completely opposite approach to education that did not aim to prepare students for passing examinations rather it 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 method and adverse effect it produced. The outcome of this mechanical education was so detrimental to the student that it rendered him into an "other" in context of his own culture and civilization. The student of the colonial school had no access to any education that was 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 alternative to the colonial education, that Tagore proposes, draws its inspiration from the Vedic model of education. Tagore highlights the necessity of the brahmachari to cultivate within him the sense of detachment from all things worldly so that he remains equable at 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 blatant 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. Tagore's educational enterprise was as much about creating the right kind of teacher as instilling the right kind of education within his students. The ideal of the *tapovan* or the 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.

CHAPTER 2 - *Education Systems in India during Ancient and Colonial Periods*

This chapter is a close study of the Vedic traditions that formed the core of Tagore's educational philosophy. In order to do the same, Atharva-Veda has been taken as the source material and pertinent hymns and slokas from it are closely studied and analyzed in order to understand the character of the Vedic school, the Vedic teacher, the Vedic student as well as the Vedic Curriculum. Commentaries from experts on the Atharva-Veda have been referred to in this context. Alongside that, how Tagore sought to implement those values in his school have been discussed. The close study of Atharva-Veda allows us understand what constituted the character of Vedic learning and to what extent Tagore wished to adopt that into the daily operations of his school. It thereby also provides the opportunity to discuss where Tagore diverged from the Vedic influence and chose to chart his own path. 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 chapter also discusses, in brief, the Buddhist traditions of learning that existed in ancient India but it is not a detailed discussion as Tagore did not cite the Buddhist traditions as his influence behind creating his own model of education.

Following this, the chapter discusses the advent of colonial education system in India and the birth of the colonial school that Tagore criticizes so heavily. 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 and thus this chapter undertakes that analysis.

With reference to both Tagore's own writing as well as memoirs from others, the detrimental character of the colonial school is established.

CHAPTER 3 - *Tagore's Educational Philosophy*

The third chapter is a discussion and analysis of what constitutes Tagore's philosophy of school education. It identifies and critiques the basic tenets that can be inferred from the study of Tagore's essays on school education. It also discusses the way Tagore was both using the Vedic influence as well as creating new practices in order to suit the need of the education system he had given birth to at Brahmacharyashram.

The chapter identifies freedom, close contact with nature, facilitating of creative self-expression alongside complete absence of rote-learning as the basis of Tagore's educational experiment. In doing so, the chapter analyses how Tagore's school faced the dilemma of implementing discipline without hampering the spirit of freedom that it was seeking to foster. Another significant value of the Tagorean philosophy of school education being the need of the student to lead a simple life, the chapter also discusses what constituted a simple life in Tagore's opinion and how he tried to create a lifestyle devoid of the excesses of material comfort in his school and taught them to glean joy from their everyday life.

The chapter discusses the character of Tagorean education, the curriculum followed at his school, the desired teacher according to the Tagorean ideal as well as the environment focused upon by Tagore in his essays and letters.

An important section of the chapter is the analysis of the complex relation between female education and Tagore. In this regard, the principal point of reference is the essay "*Stree Shiksha*" or "Female Education" that has been translated as a part of this thesis. The chapter discusses how, in this essay, Tagore frequently enters the territory of championing gender roles and focuses upon the societal constructs of femininity and women's duties and responsibilities that make the essay appear in a strong patriarchal light. In this regard, the chapter also discusses whether all the

practices of Tagore's own school warrant such a criticism. However, detailed analysis of this point is done in Chapter Five of the thesis.

CHAPTER FOUR - *Reflection of Tagore's Educational Philosophy in his Fiction, Poetry and Drama*

This chapter discusses the fictional prose, poetry and drama of Tagore in order to understand how they inform Tagore's philosophy of school education and vice versa. It does so with reference to *Totakahini*, *Achalaytan*, *Tasher Desh*, *Sharodotshab*, *Phalguni* among others. Close textual study of sections from these writings are undertaken in order to distil an understanding of the qualities that Tagore is abhorring and therefore rejecting and the values that he is upholding in his philosophy of school education. With particular reference to the play *Chhatrer Parikkha*, the exact practices of the colonial education system that were detrimental to the process of true education are highlighted and how that could destroy all learning potential in a student is established. A study of *Biday Abhishap* is also undertaken, even though it does not directly have anything to do with education, as the stated poem provides an idea of the image of *tapovan* that Tagore had in his mind.

Two short stories, *Ginni* and *Chhuti*, are analyzed for the deep understanding of child psychology evident in these works. Both the stories underpin the major flaws in the colonial education system that made the child-learner suffer in consequence and the deep impression made by that suffering is something towards which Tagore draws the reader's attention.

The chapter also refers to poems from *Shishu* and *Gitanjali* that capture the innocence of the child-learner and how that child-learner was faced with a state of claustrophobia and captivity within the colonial school.

CHAPTER FIVE - *Brahmavidyalaya: A Memorial Reconstruction*

While the thrust of the earlier chapters is on delineating the principles and methodological elements that constitute Tagore's philosophy of school education, the purpose of this chapter is to validate that methodology through 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 the reader to not only glimpse, but to actually familiarize oneself 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 early life of this school that was

deemed as an experiment of the romantic minded poet by his contemporaries. This reconstruction would enable the reader to understand exactly how Tagore was putting into action his educational philosophy - with its basis rooted firmly in Vedic tradition – 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.

Starting from the very first day of the Brahmacharyashram, there are accounts of how the school functioned under administrations of different teachers. There were multiple difficulties that lay in the path of the newborn school and first-hand accounts of those trouble-laden days allow us to understand how uncompromising Tagore was in striving to attain the ideal he had set his eyes on. The chapter, apart from discussing how day-to-day learning happened in the school, also discusses aspects like self-governance of the students, the emphasis given on the spiritual growth of the students as well as the varied performative arts practiced at the school that became a medium of education in themselves alongside becoming vehicles of the self-expression of the students.

The chapter also studies the history of the short-lived female section of the Brahmacharyashram that can perhaps only be gleaned very poignantly from the brief memorial accounts that exist. Tagore insisted on gendering the education received by male and female students thereby conditioning his male students into normative manhood and female students into normative femalehood. Therefore, even though Tagore was indeed progressive in starting the practice of co-education at Santiniketan and coaching his female students in performative 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.

PART II: THE TRANSLATION OF SELECTED ESSAYS

The essays selected for translation are as follow

- *Santiniketan Brahmacharyashram*
- *Shiksha Shamashasya*
- *Shikshar Herpher*
- *Jatiya Bidyalaya*
- *Ashramer Rup o Bikash*

- *Ashramer Shiksha*
- *Chhatrader Neetishikshsa*
- *Chhatrabrittir Pathyapustak*
- *Primary Shiksha*
- *Musholman Chhatrer Bangla Shiksha*
- *Chhutir Par*
- *Stree Shiksha*
- *Muktadhara*

Translations of these essays allow the reader to revisit the contents of the STs and analyze them from a fresh perspective. It helps 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.

While some of these essays have never been translated into English, some have existing translations produced at various periods of time. Language being a fluid medium, it naturally follows that with the passage of time, the older translations become somewhat dated in their linguistic use. So, it is beneficial for every age to have its own translations written in accordance with the kind of language that is familiar to that particular age. Preparing fresh translations thus serve both linguistic need as well as the new for newer interpretations.