



TAGORE'S CONCEPT OF NATIONALIST EDUCATION

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Tagore's ideas on education were derived mainly from his own experience. He sought to work out a system of education that would pay due consideration to the interests of the child, grow out of the tradition and history of the land and recognize the need of close and constant contact with nature. Tagore not only professed these ideas but drew up programmes to give them practical and concrete shape. His emphasis on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction grew out of his recognition that education is most effective when it is unconsciously imbibed.

Tagore was born in a family where the atmosphere was charged with deep religious feelings and yet free from adherence to forms and rituals. He accepted without any mental reservation the ancient traditions of India and was deeply influenced not only by the literature but by the religious and cultural ideas imbedded in Sanskrit. Tagore had a sane and sympathetic understanding of western values, but this was accompanied by an acute perception of the evils that follow from their mechanical adoption. His family background helped to explain both the richness of Indian heritage and his readiness to accept new ideas from the west. Herein also lays the secret of Tagore's amazing capacity to combine tradition and experiment in all his activities.

There is no dearth of literature on the poet's thoughts on education; he himself spoke and write a lot and his commentaries are equally extensive. Education in the bosom of nature, through the mother tongue and under the fatherly care and in the friendly association of the teachers formed the keystone of Rabindranath's concept of education, and this is well known to everyone. The ideal of the tapovana of the Vedic days fascinated him — boys coming from all walks of life, prince and pauper alike, living together under the same roof in the Guru's household, sharing the same food and taking up training in all sorts of work, becoming free from all inhibitions of caste and creed, fit for all undertakings in life, and to be perfect citizens in the universal society of man. To give practical demonstration to his thoughts the poet established a Brahmacharyasrama in Santiniketan in 1901, which was later to develop into the Visva-Bharati, yatra visvam bhavatyekanidam.

All these thoughts developed from the poet's urge to devise an education for all; and education for all necessarily implied education to be imparted through the vernacular later only to meet the increasing expenses of running the institution. In the late nineteenth century educated Bengal grew conscious of the limitations of the education policy provided by the colonial rulers. The medium of instruction being a foreign language, this education did not reach the masses and the result was the



growing cleavage between the English-educated few and the deprived masses. In the 1870s Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya pleaded for mass education in his journal *Bangadarshan* and emphasized the need for expanding primary and elementary education even at the cost of funds earmarked for higher studies.¹ With the growth of national consciousness a demand arose for national control over education, for change of content in the curricula, and also for making Bengali the medium of instruction.

The spread of Ideological studies created a feeling of pride in the wonder that was India. The air was surcharged with these sentiments during Rabindranath's adolescence. Thankurbari played a distinctive role in the spread of nationalism, as well as in popularizing in the legends of our national heritage. The association of Prince Dwarkanath with Raja Ram Mohan in the latter's attempt to 'break away from the tradition of passivity, the reform movement initiated by Devinderanath 'with a sharp emphasis on our traditional culture in reaction against the extreme anglicism of Young Bengal', and the organization of the Hindu Mela in 1867 by the young Tagores with Rajnarayan Bose and Nabagopal Mitra are events too well known to need repetition. As early as 1840, Debendranath had started the *Tattvabodhini Pathshala* 'for the education of the rising youth in the vernacular languages of the country'.

These are referred to here only to indicate the trends that influenced the formation of the young poet's ideas about education. However, as suited above, a widespread urge for the formulation of a national education policy, independent of foreign content and control, was seen in Bengal during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The young poet, in his thirties during the last decade of the century, took a leading part in expressing these sentiments. Speaking at Rajshahi in 1892, he emphatically stated that we must develop an educational system for the common man through the medium of Bengali. This speech of the poet was greeted, among others, by Bankimchandra and Sir Gurudas Bandyopadhyaya, the then Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta a brilliant essay entitled 'Sarkar Herfer', published in 1893. According to Sumit Sarkar, in this essay he 'answered in advance most of the arguments against a change in the medium of instruction—the absence of textbooks, the allegedly irreplaceable role of English as our window on the outside world. He pointed out that textbooks required only a serious and sincere effort and that the abandonment of English as medium of instruction did not in the least contradict the study of English as an invaluable foreign language.'²

Ideas about national education that were brewing in the nineteenth century gathered momentum during the Swadeshi movement of 1905-8. The weapon of the nationalists in the movement was 'boycott', boycott of everything that was British, including education. A National Council of Education was established on 11 March 1906 to design a curriculum for national education to be put up against the existing system. Throughout 1905, *Bhandar*, a new Bengali weekly published under the editorship of the poet, and the *Dawn* of Satischandra Mukhopadhyay published articles relating to mass education. Earlier, in 1904, in another epoch-making essay entitled 'Swadeshi



Samaj' Rabindranath advocated the use of jatra, kathakata and village fairs as simple methods for popular education. To a man like Rabindranath, the concept of national education had little to do with politics: 'it formed a part of his vision of constructive Swadeshi, of the autonomous development of the resource of the country, ignoring, rather than directly opposing, the foreign rulers'.³

But a political impulse was necessary to transform the idea of national education into a popular movement and the impulse was provided by Lord Curzon's proposal of partitioning Bengal. Rabindranath emphasized that efforts in the setting up of a national university constituted 'at the present juncture our sole agenda, our only duty'. But impulse did not override his practical judgment. In a meeting held under the auspices of the Dawn Society he urged patient planning of a national education system beginning from the foundation level. After the publication of the Carlyle Circula he said that we must develop our own education system, that a foreign government could not propagate proper education, and that being educated by foreign teachers who taught with an affront, we could not expect to preserve our dignity.

The national education movement of 1906-9, in which the poet took a leading role, had to its credit some constructive elements with far-read dug effects. In the very limited span of its life, the National Council of Education had established a number of schools in Calcutta and in the Bengal districts, which were rejuvenated during the 1921-2 movement led by Gandhi. The need for a scientific-technical education for the development of indigenous industries was being acutely felt by the nationalists since the closing years of the previous century, and the National Council established the Bengal Technical Institute, which was to develop later as the Calcutta College of Engineering and Technology, 'the real institutional nucleus perhaps of the modern Jadavpur University'.⁴ While Rabindranath, with other leading intellectuals like Ramendrasundar Trivedi and Lalitkumar Bandyopadhyaya, suggested that the efforts should be concentrated on mass education, on primary and secondary education with some training in useful crafts, others like Satischandra Mukhopadhyaya preferred to start a model college or a parallel university with research-oriented studies. It is a great misfortune for India that the poet's advice was ignored at that time. To the poet, however, national education, or a national programme for mass education, was a vision of life. With advancing age, greater wisdom and wider experience from his global tours, he enriched Bengali literature with his thought about an ideal national education for India. Throughout 1910 he wrote a series of poems forewarning his countrymen about the perils of keeping the masses uneducated. The best clue to his thoughts of this period is found in these lines: Whomsoever you push downwards, will bind you down; whomsoever you keep back, will pull you backward.

In 1921 there was again a political tumult in the country, and people were asked to sever all links with the 'satanic' British imperialism. Its leader urged the students to plunge into the movement; "education can wait but Swaraj cannot" — was his battle-cry. The poet, who was in the forefront of the movement fifteen years



back.refused to participate this time. ‘Our students are bringing their offerings of sacrifice to what? Not to a fuller education but to non-education’ — he wrote to Andrews. ‘It has at its back a fierce joy of annihilation which at its best is asceticism, and at its worst that orgy of frightful-ness in which the human nature, losing faith in the basic reality of normal life, finds a disinterested delight in an unmeaning devastation’.⁵ During the Swadeshi movement, the poet sought to explain his stand : “the reason of my refusing to advise those students to leave their schools was because the anarchy of mere emptiness never tempts me ... I am frightened of an abstraction which is ready to ignore living reality. I could not lightly take upon myself the tremendous responsibility of a negative programme ...” The non-cooperation movement followed the same principles as guided Bengal during the Swadeshi days but the vital difference was that there was little or no preparation for substituting the government -controlled education system, although the leaders of this movement had the opportunity of initiating an all-India movement through an all-India organization. Editorials and articles on the desirability of education-boycott in leading nationalist journals like the Modern Review or the Indian Annual Register manifested Bengali intellectuals reluctance to accept the principle. The Swadeshi movement saw a memorable outburst in patriotic literature—in songs and in poems, in which Rabindranath was in the forefront. Many of his masterpieces in patriotic songs were written then. As against this, the non-cooperation movement could not attract Bengali intellectuals. Gandhi regretted that few among the teachers and professors in Bengal had joined the movement⁶ and Bengali literature has little in her store on non-cooperation.⁷ As already stated, the poet was against any negative or destructive political adventure. He was far above a political leader whose vision was bounded by short-term political goal. However unpatriotic it might have looked in those days of anti-imperialist upsurge, the poet was relentless in expressing his belief in a synthesis of Eastern and Western values in our national education policy. “I sincerely wish that our education institutions be the confluence of the ideas of the East and the West. We don’t have material wealth, but we possess the wealth of our asceticism. May India be the school for all and the motto of the school is: *yastu sarvani bluntani atmanyevanupashyati, sarvabhustesh chatmanam na tato bijugupsate*. May our education be free of caste pride; we should not forget that our forefathers have left for us a message of unity and toleration: *yasmin sarvani bhutani atmaivabhud vijanatah, tatra ko mohah kah soka ekatvamanu-pashyatah*.” The poet’s ideal was one of universal truth that transcended the narrow limits of time and place.

By now Rabindranath had snapped all links with political agitation. Education to him was something that guided a man in every sphere of life; it was not limited to mastery over certain disciplines. Not only the call for boycott of education but some other utterances and activities of Gandhi during the non-cooperation movement aggrieved him, which he thought were sure to cast a bad spell on the people and their sense of values. Knowing the fascination of the Indian people for things concerned



with religion, Gandhi gave a religious tinge to the doctrines he preached. Foreign cloth he branded as impure objects and so was to be boycotted. 'Do you really believe they are impure objects?' — Tagore asked Gandhi, who promptly answered that Indian, people were touched only by religious reasons.

Politics in India had gradually passed into the hands of leaders for whom masses were often forced into action against decency. Gullible masses were often forced into action against imperialism, dragging them into action by the random use of religious slogans and by fomenting indiscipline. All talks about mass education went into oblivion; the poet's lone voice for a comprehensive education policy that would bridge the gulf between the elite and the masses, teach the Indian people toleration, give them civic sense and regard for fellow citizens irrespective of caste and creed remained in the wilderness

He was a great believer in the cooperative movement and was indeed one of the India's first and greatest co-operators. Tagore demanded a combination of tradition and experiment for the regeneration of our economic life. He wanted to introduce the latest techniques of western science while taking steps to retain the freedom and dignity of the individual. He also sought to combine in his economic pattern agriculture and industry in a way that would be most conducive to the cooperation of the village and the town. In all these, he was guided by a philosophy of creative unity whose aim was to achieve harmony and balance among the different elements that constitute the rich and complex society of India. In politics also, Tagore unhesitatingly accepted the combination of the finest elements from India and the west and adopted the western idea of democracy but to this he added the Indian conception of social initiative and social responsibility. He was certainly most insistent in the demand for the equality of all Indian citizens regardless of caste, community, religion, language or sex.

Tagore was not primarily a political or social reformer or an educationist but he was essentially a poet and writer with the message which artists have not only for their own people and age but for all peoples and all ages. Above all, and because, of all this, he was an immense national and world figure whose constant striving towards universality points the way towards the solution of the most pressing problems of the modern age. He never lost his faith in man. Even while he criticized Gandhi, he recognized his greatness as a human being.



References :

1. Bankimchandra Chatlopadhyay, 'Lokshikshal', Granthahali, vol. 2, pp. 288-9.
2. Sumit Sarkar, Swadesi Movement in Bengal, 1903-H (People's Publishing House, 1973), p. 153.
3. Ibid., p. 157.
4. Ibid., p. 167.
5. Tagore to Andrews, 'Letters to a Friend', Modern Review, March 1921, pp. 612-1
6. Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. 20 (Government of India).
7. The Swadesi movement was unique in generating immediate and spontaneous literary activity, in comparison with other phases of the nationalist movement, barring probably the 1942 movement.