

How Rabindranath Tagore's Life-experiences Influence His Concept of Education: An Evaluation

Meejanur Rahman Miju

Associate Professor, Institute of Education and Research (IER), University of Chittagong, Bangladesh

Abstract Rabindranath Tagore was the greatest poet of Bengali literature and one of the most influential thinkers of education in the world. His educational thoughts are nothing but the reflections of his personal experiences and philosophy of life. He advocated for a real-life, effective and joyful education system throughout his life and worked for the materialization of his thoughts. The very essence of his educational thinking was that education should flourish an individual fully and liberate him from all sorts of narrowness and parochialism. There should be provisions in education for awakening humanity, creating brotherhood and spiritualism in an individual and quickening social and international development. In this discussion, we will try to explore Rabindranath Tagore's experiences and philosophy of life and how this philosophy influenced his thoughts of education.

Keywords Life experiences, Education, Development, Nature, Humanity, Universality

1. Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861--1941) is the greatest poet of Bengali literature and one of the most renowned humanist writers of the world. In his writings he expressed his ideas on truth, beauty, justice, equity, enlightenment of human mind, spiritualism and other qualities which a man must be endowed and glorified with. There is no sphere of human life where his thoughts are not reflected. As a philosophical thinker he was an idealist. His philosophy of life and ideas about the world were influenced by the *Upanishad* containing the thoughts and lessons of the spiritual personalities of Ancient India. Besides it, his family atmosphere, various incidents throughout his life, personal knowledge and experience formed his overall ideas about life and surroundings. In the field of education also we see the reflection of his philosophy and ideas of life. In fact, Rabindranath stood in the same row with the world's greatest educational thinkers. He was one of the greatest educational philosophers of all ages. He thought about life and consequently innovated a theory and style of education suitable for the age. He formulated it combining Indian culture and heritage with Western arts and scientific knowledge. A sense of human welfare and universality was the main essence of his educational thoughts.

2. Methodology and Objective of the Paper

Documentary Method of research has been followed in preparing this article. Information have been collected as secondary sources from various writings of Rabindranath, books, essays and discussions by others and writings related to Rabindranath's life and educational thinking by eminent writers.

The objective of the article is to point out how Rabindranath's experiences of life influence his thoughts on education and how this thoughts may develop the existing education system of Indian sub-continent and of Bangladesh.

3. Rabindranath Tagore's Philosophy of Life

Rabindranath Tagore is basically a world-renowned romantic poet. But his genius spreads over all aspects of human life. His vision of life was a combination of the Indian spiritualism and the scientific outlook of the west. He had a deep-rooted faith in the power that pervades all the universe. It is Rabindranath who keenly realized the intense relationship between man and nature. Neither economics nor politics but the basic foundation of his internationalism was the result of his spiritualism. He was one of the superior world-citizens in the Indian sub-continent. While considering human beings he stands above all caste and creed. He was again one of the best humanist litterateurs of the world. Sense of human welfare was the only driving force behind his literary works. In his poems, songs, plays, novels and songs he frequently uttered the message of victory of the poor, the helpless and the down-trodden people. He wanted to free human mind from all sorts of evil thoughts and false

beliefs. He had a great dream for a human world free from all bondages. His thinking of humanism and internationalism was identical and inseparable. He always dreamt for a loving relationship to exist between the East and the West and its proofs are spread through his literary works. Rabindranath never searched truth in the religious scriptures or rituals of human society, rather he tried to find it in the unlimited joy of life and boundless beauties of nature. His thoughts of man and nature leave a deep impression on his sense of human society. An earnest wish for emancipation of mankind was at the root of his social thinking. He was deeply moved by all social and political events happened in his long life-span of eighty years. These happenings contributed to the making up of his concept of life. Again, the existing environment of his childhood and the culture and heritage of his family and contemporary social background paved the way for building his idealism about life. Rabindranath says, "I was born in what was then the metropolis of British rule. My ancestors came floating to Calcutta upon the earliest tide of the East-India Company. The conventional code of life for our family thereupon became a confluence of three cultures: The Hindu, the Mohammedan and the British the all-pervading fact around my boyhood being the modern city, newly built by a company of Western traders, and the spirit of the modern time seeking its unaccustomed path into our life, stumbling against countless anomalies." (Murray, 1961)

• Nature and Freedom

According to Rabindranath the biggest limitation of the present education system is its alienation from nature. He deeply believed that there is an intimate relationship with man and nature. He time and again expressed the opinion that a learner's physique and mentality is well-formed when he comes in touch of nature. Nature is the greatest teacher of man. That's why he put more emphasis on nature than books. From his boyhood he was a student of nature. We find similarities with Jean Jack Rousseau in this respect. Rousseau, in his book *Discourses of the Origin of Inequality*, wanted to take shelter in nature considering existing civilization, science and education to be artificial and deformed. Rabindranath thinks nature to be ever-existing friend to man and man can receive endless joy from nature. Nature can give splendor to man. Costly furniture and well-established infrastructure cannot give that much to a learner what the nature can offer. He says, "Children have their active subconscious mind which, like the tree, has the power to gather food from the surrounding atmosphere. For them the atmosphere is a great deal more important than rules and methods, building and appliances, class teaching and textbooks." (Bhattacharya, 1964)

• All-Indian Idealism and Bengali Culture

We notice an influence of Eastern and Western thoughts in the philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore's life. But these thoughts are not very much reflected in his concept of education. He was very much fond of Indian heritage and Bengali culture and tried to materialize his dreams of education taking components from these two sources. He was dead

against that system of education which had no intimacy with culture and heritage of respective motherland.

• Intermingling of Life with Education and What Should be a Teacher Like

Rabindranath Tagore wanted full integration of education with life. He noticed that the relationship of education with life is rather controversial. He tried to find out the reasons thereof. He opined that our existing education system was 'British', the medium of instruction was English and was 'mechanised' rather than spontaneous. He was worried that the education was meant for the materialization of the objectives of the government. To him English is extremely a 'non-national' or 'unfamiliar' language for the Indian learners. They cannot feel the essence of that language and matters of knowledge remain unexplored to them. So he suggested for the use of mother tongue extensively in the field of education. Too much dependence on books, he also observed, is the reason of alienation from life. Further he showed the ways of intermingling of education with life. He opined that this combination is possible through ideal teachers who are expert and well-versed in Bengali language and literature. He advocated for a respectful and friendly relationship between teachers and students. Teachers must be selfless and free from the temptations of all worldly gains. He advised the learners to be polite and submissive to the teachers and gain knowledge from them. If there exists a loving and respectful relationship between learners and teachers, fruitful outcome would sure to come. Thus learners would be benefited and their life would be successful and enlightened. These learners would truly be able to contribute to themselves, to the society, to the country and to the whole world of humanity.

Rabindranath opined that a teacher must possess an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. "A most important truth which we are apt to forget, is that a teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself. A lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to burn its own flame." (Murray, 1961)

• Female Education

Concept of female education is one of the most important traits of Rabindranath's educational philosophy. According to him, there must be equal opportunity for both men and women in the pursuit of education. Women should have that sort of education which is needed to play their role properly in their family. He emphasized that maintenance of family and households, health and nurturing of babies etc. should be included in the curriculum of female education. They should be taught about the atmosphere of home, its surroundings and the society to which they belong. He also opined that the rural women should be imparted vocational education and trained in the cottage industries and handicrafts so that they could contribute to their family and become self-dependent.

• Full Blooming of Life

Rabindranath advocated all the time for all-out development and self-revelation for learners through education. Education system and curriculum must be helpful to learners so that they can be able to enrich themselves and uplift their creative

faculties. He thought if a learner remains close to nature and performs creative arts like paintings, potteries, sculptures etc. his creativity increases and imaginative power gets perfection. This imagination helps him become sanguine and dreamful of life. Rabindranath's objective of education was to establish a joyful education system and with that end in view he emphasised on full freedom of a learner in education. He was dead against any hard and fast rules or constraints imposed on a learner, as they interrupt or destroy the spontaneous and fruitful course of learning. Education will adorn a learner's whole life and he will be a 'full-man' -- such was Rabindranath's dream about education. Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of life and objective of education are not the same as those of Froebel, Rousseau and Dewey. According to Froebel, the aim of education is to transform a learner to a 'spiritual man', Dewey wanted to transform a learner into 'an economic and a social man.' Rousseau's dream was to make a learner a 'natural man' through education. But Rabindranath's dream had wider dimensions. He wanted a 'perfect man', not a 'powerful' one. The man who is 'built' with the combined objectives of Froebel, Rousseau and Dewey is a 'fully-bloomed' man to Rabindranath. Rabindranath said, "The best function of education is to enable us to realise that to live as a man is great requiring profound philosophy for its ideal, poetry for its expression and heroism in its conduct." (Bhattacharya, 1964)

• Establishment of 'Shantiniketan' and 'Visva-Bharati'

Rabindranath Tagore established two very renowned educational institutions to materialize his dreams and ideas on education. These two institutions are 'Shantiniketan' and 'Visva-Bharati'. Rejecting the running and mundane education system, Rabindranath set up 'Shantiniketan' in 1901 in the lap of nature. He wanted that the light of dawn, endless green fields and the trees might reach to the minds of the learners. His philosophy of education was to create an equilibrium between individual upliftment and social development. He believed that this equilibrium only could free man from darkness of ignorance. In 'Shantiniketan' the main features of imparting education were: giving endless freedom to the learners, equality, simple lifestyle, a homely atmosphere, Indian culture and spiritualism, inclusion of various co-curricular activities like cultural programs, seasonal festivals, games and sports, acting, dance, music, get-together, traveling, painting etc. Other features were educating through mother tongue, flexible time-table and work-plans, education on handicrafts and cottage industries, programs on rural development, teaching language and so on following ancient Indian *Ashramic* system in education. A critic said about the establishment of 'Shantiniketan': "It should, therefore be clearly perceived that 'Shantiniketan' Ashram was born primarily as a protest against the conventional system of education. On the other hand, Rabindranath also had some doubts in his mind about the efficiency of our traditional indigenous institutions, such as 'Tol', 'Chatuspathi', 'Pathsala' etc. in the field of our modern education in our country". (Tagore, 1994)

One of the most remarkable traits of Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of education, as said early, was a sense of universality. This very sense is reflected in his famous institution 'Visva-Bharati'. It was, indeed, a suitable field where he could apply his thoughts and ideas on education. He wanted to make it a center of combination of science and technology of both from the east and the west. In the inaugural speech of 'Visva-Bharati' Rabindranath told that through 'Visva-Bharati' everybody would get an idea about how people of different cultures and heritages could help each other and work for the common interest of people across the world. Going through the Constitution of 'Visva-Bharati', we find a clear conception about Rabindranath's sense of universality, the very essence of which is the combination of knowledge of East and West. Some of its aims were to study the mind of Man in its realization of different aspects of truth from diverse points of view, to bring into more intimate relation with one another through patient study and research the different cultures of the East on the basis of their underlying unity. Other aims were to approach the West from the standpoint of such a unity of the life and thought of Asia, to seek to realise in a common fellowship of study the meeting of East and West and thus ultimately to strengthen the fundamental condition of the world peace through the free communication of ideas between the two hemispheres, and to conduct research into the study of the religion, literature, history, science and arts of Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian, Islamic, Sikh, Christian and other civilizations may be pursued along with the culture of the West with that simplicity of externals which is necessary for the spiritual realisation, in amity, good fellowship and co-operation between the thinkers and scholars of both Eastern and Western countries, free from all antagonisms of race, nationality, creed or caste and in the name of the one Supreme Being.

To Rabindranath human beings stand supreme. He believed that the aim of human life is to attain humanism and to be 'perfect' with all the positive qualities. He said in 1936, while explaining the aims of the establishment of 'Visva-Bharati': "We have been waiting for the person....I have felt that the civilization of the West today has its law and orders but no personality. It has come to the perfection of a mechanical order but what is there to humanize it. It is the person who is in the heart of all things." (Mukhopadhyay, Sravan, 1963)

4. Implementation of Rabindranath's Thoughts in Education

Rabindranath cherished an effective, joyful and spontaneous education system throughout his life. He worked for materialization of his thoughts and established two famous educational institutions called 'Shantiniketan' and 'Visva-Bharati', rejecting the existing mundane and 'lifeless' education system. These institutions are unique in nature and imparting education in a different way unlike other institutions. The outcome of these institutions is amazing.

But it is surprising that though most of the educationists and plan-makers admit the superiority and usefulness of Rabindranath's educational philosophy, they are not very much willing to implement it thoroughly in the field of education. There may be some political or social reasons behind it. (Shishir, 2015) As a result, Rabindranath's educational beliefs have been implemented partially along with other modern concepts of education in the institutions of Indian sub-continent and in Bangladesh.

5. Conclusions

Rabindranath thought about education not for establishing any basic theory thereof. At different stages of life he had to think about education of his country, how it should be and what objectives should it have. His educational thoughts are nothing but the results of these necessity-based ideas. His heart-felt feelings, personal experiences, sense of life and necessity of his native country played the most important role in the formulation of his educational thoughts. He always cherished for creating 'a full man' through education and the system of education he formulated was just for making an individual 'full' and 'perfect'. We find no mechanism, strict discipline or excess of rules and regulations in his educational system. He considered excessive rules and bonding to be harmful for education as well as for life. He put utmost importance on self-revelation and self-dependence of an individual. He wished for such a man "who will think by himself, search by himself and do by himself." (Tagore, Poush, 1358) This sort of a man was his earnest expectation. So he wanted to allow a learner full freedom and wanted him to be bloomed in full dimension. This real life thinking of education is similar to that of world renowned educational thinkers and even more than that as it has more newness and uniqueness in some considerations. "Tagore was no more entirely original than great educators like Plato, Bacon, Locke, Rousseau and Dewey, because he reflected, as much as they, some past or contemporary thoughts....Tagore's educational ideas had deep and powerful roots and did not

originate, as it were, in midair.

In fact,....it is one of the great merits of Tagore's educational thought it reflected within a single compass, so much of the best educational thoughts of the world". (Mukherjee, 1962) Rabindranath thought sincerely about education and set concrete examples of his thinking in the field of education. He thought of education as he thought of life. He formulated his idea of education in real-life context. But unfortunately we have not been able to exploit and implement Rabindranath fully in our educational procedures, though he is ever existing in all the aspects of our everyday life. It is high time we realized his educational thoughts and implemented his ideas in the education system of Indian subcontinent and especially in Bangladesh to ensure its speedy development with an enlightened population and productive manpower.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bhattacharya, Bhujangabhushan, 1964, *Rabindra Shiksha Darshan*, Calcutta, p.42.
- [2] Murray, John, 1961, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Poet's School, Pioneer in Education*, London, p.50.
- [3] Mukhapadday, Pravatkumar, *Sravan*, 1363, *Rabindrajiboni o Rabindra shahitya Prabeshak*, Vol.4, Visva- Bharati, Calcutta, p.47.
- [4] Mukharjee, Himanshu Bhusan, 1962, *Education for Fulness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, India, p.441.
- [5] Shishir, Shamsuddin, 2015, *Shikshakata Mohan Pesha*, Edu-Aid Publishers, Chattogram, Bangladesh, p.45.
- [6] Tagore, Supriyo, 1994, *Rabindranath's Philosophy of Education, Patha Bhavan: A Poet's School*, Shantiniketan: Visva Bharati, India, p.18.
- [7] Tagore, Supriyo, *Poush*, 1358, 'Shiksha-Shanskar', 'Shiksha', *Rabindra-Rachanabali* (12), India, p.293.