

# The Poet's Challenge to Schooling: Creative Freedom for the Human Soul

A Generative and Critical Analysis of  
Rabindranath Tagore's Innovations in Shiksha

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## INDIAN INNOVATIONS IN SHIKSHA SERIES

### Preface

Across the world today, people find themselves trapped in overwhelming socio-cultural, ethical, and spiritual crises. We see the distress signs: rapid increases in crimes, unemployment, environmental degradation, endangered species, loss of languages, poverty, malnutrition, disease, militarism, and violent death, especially in the last fifty years. Yet ironically, in this same span of time, the amount of money, capital, technology, and trade worldwide has increased manifold, as have the number of health facilities and schools. Clearly, the Utopia that these institutions (whether Capitalist or Communist) promised is very far from being realized. In fact, for the world's social majorities they have made life much worse. The trade-offs are just too high. It is clear today that we cannot continue down this path of Development and Progress; it is neither morally just nor ecologically sound. But what are the ways to resist it, to dismantle it and to discover and create new directions?

Visionaries of India's past – Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo, and Krishnamurti, among others – have left us with several potent 'seed-thoughts'. In their writings and their experiments, each tried to envision a better reality for India (and for the world): a reality unmarred by the greed, exploitation and dehumanization of Western-style Economic Development, by the competition and violence of the Nation-State and Nationalism, and by the intellectual colonization and paralyzing dependency of Western-style factory-schooling. They believed that India could only regenerate itself to face the challenges ahead by seeking out those beliefs, values, languages, relationships, cultures, knowledge systems, technologies, conceptual frameworks and wisdoms, which had organically grown from her local communities. At the same time, they were careful not to romanticize the past. Rather, they engaged in processes of critical traditionalism, believing that the injustices and problems within traditions and customs required continuous self-reflection and self-correction. Thus, in their own unique ways, these innovators tried to catalyze counter-vision and paths for living, learning, sharing and growing together in India.

Why are we focusing on these four individuals? After all, a multitude of thinkers and experimenters have emerged throughout India's rich and diverse history. However, what distinguishes Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo, and Krishnamurti from the rest is their effort to situate human learning in larger spiritual, political, socio-cultural, and economic vision-processes of resistance and regeneration.

For them, schooling germinated from a certain context and it was just as important to question/challenge this larger context, as it was to create more meaningful spaces of learning. To varying degrees, all four were engaged in India's freedom struggle, and their experiences around this struggle inspired them to imagine a different conception of freedom and, with it, a different India. They beautifully and forcefully expressed themselves in writings, poetry, speeches and meditations, and their ideas are illustrated in very different parts of India: Gujarat/Madhya Pradesh/Maharashtra; Bengal; Pondicherry; Andhra Pradesh/Karnataka.

The great tragedy today is that while many people still refer to them, few really know what they envisioned, and even fewer know how to evolve their ideas/experiments in human learning or how to re-contextualize them to make sense in today's rapidly changing world. In fact, when interpreting their ideas and experiments, two things typically seem to happen: either their words are taken very literally to produce standardized, static prescriptions and lifeless action; or they are starkly misinterpreted/manipulated/co-opted to fuel particular agendas. Part of the impetus for this series therefore is to re-open the space for interpreting Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo, and Krishnamurti. While our interpretations will certainly not be exhaustive, they do carve out spaces for us to re-explore and question the relevance and significance of what these revolutionaries said and did, as well as, reflect on how we might apply/evolve their ideas and experiments for the crises we face today.

Indeed, the current 'crisis of the schooled' and the monopoly of the 'culture of schooling' requires radical new thinking, new dialogue, and new actions. Efforts towards constructing this radical discourse are presently being driven by thinkers in other parts of the world (mainly from industrialized countries), who have come to terms with the fact that schooling cannot be reformed. However, exploring and learning from the radicalism of these four visionaries could do much to resuscitate the intellectually-vapid discourse on education in India. It could uplift us out of the dull, stillwater of education reform that is currently submerging the country and propel us towards the more vibrant, pluralistic currents of transformation of *shiksha*.

Here, we must note the use of the term '*shiksha*'. We are consciously differentiating between modern education and *shiksha*, as in the series name, "Indian Innovations in Shiksha". Although in today's discourse *shiksha* has been widely translated as 'education', we know that the epistemological and

ontological roots of these terms are vastly different. Each is guided/driven by distinct conceptual and philosophical frameworks of how human beings should live, relate to each other, be with Nature, and struggle/grow as individuals and in collectives. Each also has a different understanding of human and societal learning processes. However, instead of describing *a priori* what these differences are, we hope that they will reveal themselves through the explorations of the ideas/experiences of Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo, and Krishnamurti. Therefore, in part, the purpose of this series is to de-colonize the concept of *shiksha* and regenerate its meanings for the present context.

By deeply probing into and interrogating these four individuals' critiques, frameworks and experiments in shiksha, we hope to provoke the educational community to established lines of thinking as well as to offer fresh insight into the development of learning societies for 21<sup>st</sup> century India.

Finally, while we think it is best for the purposeful uses of this research series to germinate organically, we do have a few ideas for its application. For example, we envision the research could be used to:

- ❑ design interactive learning workshops with policymakers, teachers and curriculum designers on some of the innovative concepts emerging from one or all of these four visionaries, such as freedom, self-discipline, creativity, the integrated human being, *satyagraha*, etc.;
- ❑ promote organizational self-analysis and assessment by considering the importance of reflection, dialogue, and action, and by addressing the potential obstacles to organizational growth and accomplishment;
- ❑ initiate new learning process-projects in different parts of the country, drawing upon and re-contextualizing these four visionaries as appropriate; and/or
- ❑ produce new thought-provoking media/publications on innovative and meaningful learning, utilizing as many different media as possible (poetry, plays, songs, short stories, essays, lectures, etc.).

We invite and encourage your ideas and responses on this paper and on the others that will follow in this series.

- Manish Jain  
Coordinator  
Shikshantar

***“Either we shall all be saved together, or drown together into destruction.”***

— Rabindranath Tagore

### **Introduction**

What lies at the root of the crises — environmental destruction, dehumanizing poverty and exploitation, increasing frustration, stress and violence — experienced around the world today? In the interest of brevity, people often point to the System: a set of attitudes and values, a particular meaning-making system, a distinctive group of processes, structures and institutions, all which seem to propagate a view of the materialistic, self-gratifying, aggressive, and mechanistic human being. A whole set of economic, political, social, educational and religious structures/institutions support this human being – rewarding and rationalizing the ones who take, abuse, and exploit the most and crushing the ones who try to live with a different vision of being and relating. These institutions, and the System as whole, correspond to the belief that people need to be controlled or managed; they cannot be trusted to take care of themselves nor each other. In this System, ‘education’ is really a form of thought-control. Human beings are not taught to be creative, compassionate, or critical. Rather, they are taught to conform to the dominant System and serve as another cog in Its Wheel. Thus, the factory-schooling education system is both an outcome and a reinforcing tool of the System. It provides additional ‘minion-products’ to further operationalize, expand and elaborate upon this dehumanizing and destructive vision of humankind.

However, what would happen if we challenged and changed the underlying assumptions of this vision, and imagined instead that human beings are (or have infinite potential to be) generous, loving, spiritual, organic (ever growing), and dynamic (ever changing) entities? We then would imagine learning as a constructive and creative process, and our entire universe of human relational systems – educational, economic, political, social, and spiritual – would completely change to reflect and nurture this vision. Rabindranath Tagore, like Mahatma Gandhi and others, articulated a vision of learning that stemmed from a completely different sense of the human being and that therefore resulted in an entirely different set of economic, political, and social institutions. While one can critically interrogate his assumptions and analysis, the fact remains that his ideas and experiences show us one very real possibility of learning, living and relating in unique and revolutionary ways.

For those of us interested in transforming the dominant frameworks of Education and Development, it is crucial to know that completely different



visions of living and being can exist in the world. Today, we seem to have lost the ability to think outside the proverbial 'box'. We limit and confine ourselves with what we have by assuming or presuming that this is as good as it gets: so-called representative democracy, the nation-state, the capitalist market system, factory-schooling, the mass media, etc. Yet, at the same time, we know that we cannot solve the crises before us, using the same thinking that produced those crises in the first place (to paraphrase Albert Einstein). We need to learn from and explore transformative approaches, not reformative touch-ups. Band-aids can no longer suffice when the wounds are bursting through the seams.

We also need to understand and learn from Rabindranath Tagore. On one level, we must begin to know Tagore as an individual. Instead of reproducing his biography, which has been done at length<sup>1</sup>, this analysis strives to comprehend his vast contribution to thinking on and experimenting in education, development, and humanity in general. While this is not meant to be a definitive, all-encompassing work on Tagore, it is an attempt to interpret and shed some light on his particular contributions to these fields. By nearly all accounts, Tagore has been widely misunderstood, even by those currently working in the institution he began, Santiniketan. Such misinterpretation has led to either a complete disregard for Tagore's ideas, or to the misappropriation of his name to give credibility to particular activities, which only further enhance the misunderstanding. Tagore has also been largely unrecognized beyond his native Bengal, nor beyond his cultural/literary reputation as a Nobel Laureate poet, a songwriter, and a playwright. Indeed, most people do not realize that "some two-thirds of his writings are serious essays, mostly on the political and socio-economic problems of India and the crisis of civilization."<sup>2</sup> Where people do consider Tagore, he is largely stereotyped and relegated to the corner of Bengali poet or national anthem writer.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, I seek to present Tagore in a different light: as a 'freedom fighter' (in the very literal sense of the term). Tagore's ideas and efforts, and particularly his concept of *swaraj*, make him a timely and important resource, both as a revolutionary thinker-doer and a true advocate for freedom. Here, by freedom, I mean, the creative, open and unhindered search for truths and Self, in the context of a larger socio-spiritual vision of humanity.

On another level, Tagore and his conceptions of the human being, learning/education and political, social, and economic relationships, offers us a

platform from which we can begin to probe the connection between individual experience and systemic change processes. How does one man's individual effort contribute to systemic change? What is the relationship between projects/models and change processes? By delving deep into Tagore's writings, and by exploring the evolution of the institutions Tagore initiated at Santiniketan, we may be able to discover both the barriers to and new directions for systemic change.

What becomes clear is that change is not so simple. Indeed, from Tagore, we gain contradiction and confusion, along with insight and revelation. In my view, it is not so important whether one thinks Tagore was right or wrong in what he thought and did — though notably, many of his intuitions coincide with the latest research on learning<sup>4</sup> and many of his 'prophecies' have materialized in today's reality. What is important, however, is he presents the very possibility of a different reality and that we can learn from his efforts by addressing their relevance to the roots and symptoms of the crises currently before us.

Therefore, this critical and generative analysis will consist of four sections. First, I seek to explore Tagore's philosophy in a more holistic way. That is, I examine his conception of the human being (of the soul, freedom, Nature, creativity), his view of the System (progress, the Nation, economic and social hierarchies), and his sense of learning and education. It should be noted that Tagore was extremely critical of schooling, a sentiment that grew from his own experience with schooling. He called school "the cause of my suffering" and "an office arrangement [that] does not suit God's creation."<sup>5</sup> Notably, Tagore did not separate his concerns about education from his larger ideas about freedom, the System, and humanity.

The second section investigates Santiniketan, the space Tagore created to live out his ideas. I posit that Santiniketan must be seen as a conscious attempt at de-schooling and de-institutionalizing,<sup>6</sup> instead of being reduced to simply an ashram, an experiment or, worst of all, a school. With this in mind, I look both at what Santiniketan was meant to be (a radical challenge to the System) and what it has become today (a co-opted, wounded, visionless mainstream institution). I attempt to provide explanations for the discrepancy between the prior intention and the current manifestation. The reasons are manifold, ranging from conceptual to institutional, and must be understood if we are to cross barriers and go forward in any future efforts towards systemic transformation.

The third section will be unique for discussions on Tagore. Here, I seek to analyze Tagore's ultimate relevance for systemic transformation today. This requires situating education into a larger picture of development, as Tagore did, and assessing his insights towards the challenges we face today. In this section, I will address the issue of alternative schools and how such 'experiments' fit into the larger picture. I will also discuss the ideas of 'evolution' and 'appropriation', and what individual leadership and control mean for systemic transformation. Ultimately, the analysis returns to Tagore's concept of *swaraj*, from which I draw meaning to give us insight into today's realities and struggles for change.

The final section of the paper concludes with several questions to encourage deeper thinking and begins a dialogue with several people, who are deeply concerned about education and the future of humanity. After reading the first publication of this study, 19 individuals have shared their comments and reflections regarding these larger issues of education, development, and transformation. It is my hope that additional learning processes, inspired by Tagorean ideas, will organically emerge from this analysis to nurture further dialogue and change. Such processes may include workshops, publications, methodologies/tools, or multimedia projects.

## Methodology

In preparing this analysis, I began by conducting a thorough literature review of primary materials by Tagore. These writings include his poetry, plays, essays, autobiography, short books, lectures and addresses. Unlike most researchers in education, I read and drew upon Tagore's creative works, for through these pieces, I felt I would gain a better sense of the depth of his understanding. His poetry and plays, in particular, offer meaningful and illustrative expressions of his beliefs. I also gathered additional information from a few secondary sources, to get a fuller sense of Tagore's history, background, and biography, although these sources figure less in my analyses. The bibliography offers the details of these various references.

From this completed literature review, I developed a preliminary typology through which to synthesize and contextualize Tagore's ideas. The typology was also meant to provide a framework for analyzing and interpreting the activities/evolution of Santiniketan and Sriniketan, the institutions founded by Tagore. It incorporates three main areas: **Understanding of the Human Being and of Human Potential** (relationship to community/society; relationship to Nature; notions of identity, diversity, and wholeness; senses of spirituality, freedom, and culture), **Vision of Economic, Political, and Social System** (view of nation-state; economic and political philosophies; visions of societal relationships and interactions; notions of development, progress and success); **Concept of Learning** (processes of learning; relationships and roles within learning; learning environments and spaces; notions of human intelligences, knowledges, wisdom, creativity, motivation; goals of learning and/or education). While I have created these categories for organizational purposes, I should clarify that they are neither totally discrete nor mutually exclusive. Indeed, there is a great deal of overlap among them, for one's understanding of the human being directly feeds into one's vision of economic, political, social systems and the conception of learning that underlies them.

The second stage of this research consisted of a 20-day field visit to Santiniketan, Sriniketan, and Calcutta in West Bengal. There I met with and interviewed staff, community, students and graduates, in order to better understand how the values and activities envisioned by Tagore are currently being carried out in context. The content and comprehension of the qualitative research obtained through these interviews, focus groups, observations, and other interactions appear in section two. For more information, I have included

a list of the people I met, the questions I posed to them, and the places I visited in Annexes 1, 2, and 3.

The final methodological stage of this critical and generative study is the feedback it receives. Notably, this research is not meant to gather dust on a bookshelf. (I am quite conscious of the fate of research papers past.) Rather, as a generative initiative, it is meant to spark new energy and action into India's discourse on education. I am sharing the following paper, not only with people interested in Tagore and Santiniketan, but also with many other local, national, and international partners. The comments received and ideas for the application of this research will constitute the final phase of this process. As an initial step in this direction, the fourth section includes contributions from around India and the world, which seek to further enrich the level of dialogue by providing readers with different perspectives on Tagore, Santiniketan and this analysis. I am hopeful that the combination (of this analysis and of the feedback) will point to avenues for further research and discussion and that it will generate more thinking, dialogue and action on Tagore and on transformation in education and development in general.

I also would like to acknowledge the limitations of my methodology. Most significantly, I do not read or speak Bengali, which certainly limited both the scope of the materials I could engage with and the depth of the interviews I conducted. Interviews were conducted in Hindi and English and the resources I draw from, as one will see in the bibliography, are all in English. While I do believe that I have examined Tagore's ideas and experiences in depth, I also agree that the analysis could be further strengthened by incorporating Tagore's writings in Bengali and carrying out additional interviews in Bengali. I encourage those readers with such an interest to collaborate with us further in this process and help us to gather and share a better understanding of Tagore.

## Section 1: Tagore's Vision of the Human Being, the System, and Learning

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) lived amidst the turmoil of British and Indian relations. He spent nearly his entire life, in one form or another, exposing the depravity of modern Western civilization and attempting to regenerate India on its own terms. Through poetry, literary works, lectures and addresses, written mostly in his mother tongue, Bengali, Tagore played a significant — though not mainstream political — role in India's independence movement. He envisioned *swaraj*, not as simply the absence of the British, but more importantly, as the recovery of the self and of civilization in India. To try to fully comprehend Tagore's beliefs, I have categorized them into three areas:

(1) *Understanding of the Human Being, Human Potential, and the Purpose of Human Life*, (2) *Challenging Economic, Political and Social Systems and Regenerating Swaraj*, and (3) *Critiquing Education and Rediscovering Learning*.

In each section, I begin with a series of questions and then draw upon Tagore's varied writings to strive to answer them in a coherent, compacted form. However, I feel this warrants a word of caution: Like any attempt at organizing another person's ideas, there appears the illusion of a linear and orderly thinking process. While Tagore is certainly holistic and clear in his writings, it is important to note that his ideas developed over time, with experiences, interactions, and reflections, and with questioning, contradiction, and change. I have taken Tagore's written thoughts as a whole, juxtaposing different texts against one another, in my attempt to provide a full, rich picture. I trust the audience will bear this in mind in this section and throughout the rest of the analysis.

### Understanding the Human Being, Human Potential, and the Purpose of Human Life

*"We die when we lose our physical life; we perish when we miss our humanity.  
And humanity is the dharma of human beings."*

— Rabindranath Tagore, The Religion of Man, 1930

- What is the relationship between the human being/human soul and Nature or the divine?
- What do truth, love, simplicity, and goodness mean for human life?

- What is the significance of creativity and freedom in understanding human potential?

Tagore's ideas on economic, political, and social systems and on learning and education grow from and engage in a tri-ologue with his understanding of the human being, human potential and human life. In Tagore's writings, we see a convergence of several interconnected themes: a) the human soul and the divine/Nature, b) truth, love, simplicity and goodness, c) creativity and freedom. This convergence ultimately has to do with the connection between individual human personality and the universal/collective spirit. Drawing upon the *Upanishads* (ancient Indian texts), Tagore defined *dharma* (loosely translated as the purpose or meaning of one's human life) as the realization of the infinite self through a life of self-sacrifice. In other words, by living a life in which the individual self is open and dedicated to a larger universe, one could discover one's whole or fuller Self and attain the ultimate purpose of human life. Each person would therefore find their place in the Infinite by living, being and relating in self-giving and self-potential-discovering ways.

To understand how Tagore came to this vision of the human being and human life, we must first recognize how he viewed the relationship between Nature and the human soul. It was, for him, a deep and true bond of love. Nature was not something to be controlled or destroyed; instead, as the source of life, it was to be loved and respected by humankind. Indeed, because life emerges from a combination of the divine and the natural — or perhaps from the divine *in the* natural — humankind must recover and discover itself in Nature.

In stressing this belief, Tagore fundamentally challenges the Enlightenment-driven, anthropocentric view of the world, where humans stand loftily at the center and the rest of the living world caters to their needs. He questions why dependency on Nature for survival should necessarily lead to an antagonistic relationship with Nature. Tagore thought human beings were foolish to imagine they were superior to and radically separate from the physical world, and, as a result, to either ignore it with an air of disdain or to consider it their evil enemy.<sup>7</sup> To take destructively and wastefully from Nature, or to selfishly attempt to control and own it, are in fact the greatest obstacles to discovering the full consciousness of life in the divine.<sup>8</sup> For Tagore, perfect freedom for the soul actually stems from the perfect harmony of a relationship realized in the natural world — not through our standard, 'scientific' response to *knowing it*, but instead through our intimate, soulful connection to *being with it*.

To acquire this type of intimate relationship with Nature, the individual must uncover the dimensions of truth, simplicity, love, and goodness that lie within his/her being. Tagore imagined human life as a three-fold process: of truth-unity at birth, truth-confusion in adolescence and adulthood (losing oneself in complexity and separating oneself from one's surroundings), and truth-reunification in old age (recovering the simplicity of perfect truth and the infinite bond of love).<sup>9</sup>

To liberate oneself in this truth process and to reunify the truth within oneself, human beings require simplicity, or what Tagore ironically terms 'poverty'. This type of ascetic simplicity brings people back into complete touch with life and the world. Contrary to popular misinterpretations of himself and his lifestyle, Tagore actually believed that living richly (with wealth or luxury) meant living in a world of lesser reality. By craving, collecting and living amongst luxuries, one would be living by proxy and would lack personal experience with the natural and human world.<sup>10</sup> And such personal experience is essential for realizing oneself in a wider and deeper relationship with the universe.

It should be noted here that Tagore was not speaking in favor of tragic human suffering or chronic injustices. Nor was he advocating for a world in which a few people exploit many others to inequitably hoard resources for themselves, thereby creating 'poverty' for the majority. Instead, in his interpretation, 'poverty' meant simplicity and non-materialistic living. It would be a condition to be welcomed by all, instead of a bane to be eliminated through 'poverty alleviation schemes' (which equate success in life with the ability to purchase or own of modern luxuries).<sup>11</sup> As Tagore explained, by seeking to satisfy one's greed, one would never enable to surrender the individual self to the Universal Self; instead one would only be further weighed further down in truth-confusion.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, I imagine that for Tagore, 'alleviating poverty' would mean eliminating the various forms of exploitation and injustice, which communicate and justify the idea that material acquisition — at any and all costs — is the ultimate purpose of human life.

Goodness and love help to complete the connection between the individual and the universal. For human beings to live a life of dignity, they must have a sense of obligation and of freedom at the same time — this is goodness; for them to live a spiritual life, this union of goodness must have its culmination in love.<sup>13</sup> Thus, goodness and love are powerfully interrelated. Living a life of goodness



means living the life of all and realizing the purpose of one's life in the infinite.<sup>14</sup> Truth and simplicity alone are not enough; they must be furthered by goodness and culminate in love. Tagore's play, *Sanyasi*, veritably echoes this theme, as the ascetic realizes that he can only recover truth and meaning by serving as a father to a girl outcast by the world: *"The bird flies in the sky, not to fly away into emptiness, but to come back again to this great earth — I am free... I am free among things and forms and purpose. The finite is the true infinite, and love knows its truth. My girl, you are the spirit of all that is — I can never leave you."*<sup>15</sup>

Yet, such a life does not require that one deny the full potential of the individual, or sacrifice the individual to the collective. Indeed, Tagore thought that individuality was essential to human communion, for social relationships are dependent on the creative expression and exchange of individual tastes, imaginations, constructive faculties, and personalities. But rather than the individual taking primacy in society, the best of individual expressions would enable a connection towards the universal whole. By experiencing the negative form of freedom, which is license, individuals can attain the positive form of freedom, which is love. For example, simply doing what one wants, where and when one desires, would be to take freedom in the negative. To use this license, on the other hand, towards uncovering truth, goodness, and simplicity, in relationship to the larger collective, would lead one to positive freedom. That is, the freedom of self-will (bound by a finite limitation) is an integral part to discovering and unleashing the true human potential of infinite goodness and love.<sup>16</sup>

In this way, Tagore's sense of 'freedom' stands apart from the modern discourse of rights, individualism, and selfishness. 'Freedom' for him is self-will and license, to discover oneself and one's potential, but it takes the direction of searching for internal goodness and collective love, not of trampling upon one's fellow beings to get ahead or be on top. Tagore gives the example of the simple man from the village to illustrate his concept of freedom: It is "freedom from the isolation of self, from the isolation of things that impart a fierce sense of possession." By living in the social connections of love and goodness, the villager knows that "freedom is not the mere negation of bondage, but is a positive realization that gives pure joy to our whole being."<sup>17</sup>

Freedom, as related to creativity, also receives special significance from Tagore in his conception of the human being. Creativity again connects the individual

to the universal and to the divine in the natural. Drawing from the *Upanishads*, Tagore explains that “*though individuals are separately seeking their expression, their success is never individualistic in character. Human beings must find and feel and represent in all their creative works the Eternal, the creator.*”<sup>18</sup> Creation is a manifestation of the divine in the natural, as the human heart looks for inspiration to the world, “whose soul seems to be aching for expression in its endless rhythm of lines and colors, music and movements, hints and whispers”.<sup>19</sup> Thus, human expression — indeed our very desire to express and create — comes out of a deep soul-searching and soul-connecting process to the natural. Emotions, feelings and their relationship to the world are therefore central to creative expression, for they help to transform the physical world into a “more intimate world of sentiments.”<sup>20</sup>

Even more broadly, the very act of creation is freedom, for it allows human beings to discover their full potential. They have the opportunity to live in *what is theirs*, to *make the world* of their own selection, and to move it through their movement.<sup>21</sup> In this way, the searching free spirit (questing for a better world) and the divine of the world, together fuel the creative process. Indeed, it seems that everything comes full circle in Tagore’s understanding of the human being, human life, and human potential. The ultimate end of freedom and creation for Tagore is “to know that I am,” *to know that we are*, and to redirect human consciousness from the separateness of the self into unity with all. The true perfection of freedom therefore finds its intensity in love.<sup>22</sup> As Tagore expresses in *Gitanjali*,

*“Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of  
freedom in a thousand bonds of delight...  
No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight  
and hearing and touch will bear thy delight.  
Yes, all my illusions will burn into the illumination of joy, and all  
my desires ripen into fruits of love.”*<sup>23</sup>

In this stanza, we see the linkages among simplicity, liberation, freedom, sentiment, nature, joy, creation, and love. What is imminently clear is that Tagore did not envision human life as singular, mechanical, selfish or soul-less. Human beings are not ‘resources’ or ‘capital’, nor are they ‘workers’, ‘consumers’, ‘soldiers’ or ‘drones’.<sup>24</sup> They are not to be divided into categories of smart or dumb, beautiful or ugly, rich or poor (which Tagore notably redefined), or any other limiting and superficial binary. Instead, human beings are to be seen as manifestations of the divine in the natural, as free-willed

creators, with endless potential and whose purpose in life is realization of the infinite in love. The paths to realizing this universal and uncovering one's potential should therefore be as diverse and open, as liberating, creative and delightful, as possible.

### Challenging Economic, Political, and Social Systems and Regenerating *Swaraj*

*"I am never against progress, but when, for its sake, civilization is ready to sell its soul, then I choose to remain primitive in my material possessions, hoping to achieve my civilization in the realm of the spirit."*

— Rabindranath Tagore, City and Village, 1924

- What is progress? What is civilization?
- What are the problems with the structures and System(s) we have accepted?
- What are possibilities for other ways of living and being? What is *Swaraj*?

At the core of Tagore's entire belief system was an unshakable confidence in humankind — even while acknowledging that it was under siege. He said in an address given in Milan, Italy, *"I have great faith in humanity. Like the sun it can be clouded, but never extinguished. [Yet,] I admit that at this time, when the human races have met together as never before, the baser elements appear predominant."*<sup>25</sup> Given his understandings of the human being, human potential and human life, it should come as no surprise that Tagore was a harsh critic of the economic, political, and social systems that were dominating in his day (and that continue, for the most part, to dominate in the world today). They did not offer the liberating paths needed to free human potential and realize the purpose of human life, nor did they respect human beings as free-willed creators or manifestations of the divine in the natural.

Instead, as quoted above, Tagore believed that the System was destroying both the individual human soul as well as collective humanity. He enhanced his criticism of the processes and foundation of the System by re-envisioning a) its economic, political, and social institutions, b) its concept of civilization and the nation, c) its understanding of the relationship between the East and West, and d) its view of science/technology. An overarching theme — the notion of Progress — shadows Tagore's critique of the destructive manifestations of these four aspects of the System, while the notion of *Swaraj* serves as an umbrella over Tagore's constructive, regenerative vision of human relations. Moving

from critique to regeneration in an ‘hourglass’ approach, I examine how the above four areas fit under the larger themes of Progress and Swaraj to offer a coherent picture of total transformation.

The easiest way to understand Tagore’s disdain for Progress is to recall his story of the moon.<sup>26</sup> He imagines that the moon was once a planet like Earth, full of “color, music, movement” and life, natural gifts and vast potential. But in the course of time, a group of people, who were selfish and bent on Progress, was born on the moon. They wanted to ‘succeed’ and equated success with ‘accumulation’, ‘big-ness’ and ‘quickness’. So they developed machinery to strip the land of its gifts and strip each other of his/her potential, and “they laughed at moral law and took it to be a sign of racial superiority to be ruthless in the satisfaction of their desires.” They failed to realize that growth and speed did not produce fulfillment or that this type of progress could never lead to completeness. Eventually, as a result of their self-indulgence and voracious appetite, the moon became a barren and desolate place, devoid of all life and existence.

The dominant metaphor of Progress was as a cancerous growth, and Tagore knew that pursuit of it meant the destruction of humankind: “*Progress which greedily allows Life’s field to be crowded with an excessive production of instruments, becomes a progress towards death. For Life has its own natural rhythm, and proud Progress that rides roughshod over Life’s cadence kills it at the end.*”<sup>27</sup> What people were doing in the name of Progress — “building vast and monstrous organizations” or seeking a “mere unlimited augmentation of power” — lacked truth.<sup>28</sup> It therefore could never result in real progress; that is, it could never bring the individual to wholeness or join the collective to the universal.

Even more importantly, Tagore recognized that this metaphor for Progress was more than simply an ‘attitude problem’. Rather, it had seeped into the foundation of the entire System. The destructiveness of the System could therefore come as no surprise, for “all systems produce evil sooner or later, when the psychology at the root of them is wrong.”<sup>29</sup> A System that propagates abstractions — such as “*survival of the fittest*” (where people are equated with wild animals), *bureaucracy* (where people are reduced to generalizations), and *the classroom* (where children are students and not individuals) — would inevitably destroy the whole world of human life and human potential.<sup>30</sup> Today, we could add to Tagore’s list of abstractions *the market* (where people are

consumers or producers instead of full beings) and *the mass media* (where people are passive receivers of the glossed-over or biased realities of the powerful). A System founded on this cancerous sense of Progress, that utilizes such abstractions, thus devalues love, truth, and human relations; allows baser elements like material wealth to prevail; creates and exacerbates inequalities; and encourages injustice to reign supreme.

How does this System operate? To better understand how this type of Progress is expanded and reinforced, as Tagore did, we must break it down into its specific economic, political, and social institutions. As a result of industrialization, mechanization, militarization, technologization and nationalism, economic, political, and social organizations have lost the ability to center themselves in the foundational world of life, nature or the divine. Materialism runs rampant and the quest for wealth, power and control takes precedence in human life. Individuals, human potential, love, truth, goodness, etc. are all ruthlessly sacrificed to bloodthirsty economic and political structures.

Furthermore, wealth and property — the cornerstones of the capitalist market system — have dire effects on the social order. They beget envy, produce irreconcilable class division, break social bonds, drain the life sap of the community, and wreak havoc all over the world by generating forces that can coax or coerce people to deeds of injustice and wholesale horror.<sup>31</sup> As Tagore explained, when increasing private possession and enjoying exclusive advantage runs ahead of establishing the common good and general happiness, the bonds of harmony and of sustenance must give way, forcing brothers to separate and even become enemies.<sup>32</sup> The ‘representative democracy’ political system only serves to further exacerbate this enmity:

*“In this kind of Body politic, the organs of information and expression, through which opinions are manufactured, together with the machinery of administration, are all openly or secretly manipulated by those prosperous few... Such a society necessarily becomes inhospitable and suspicious, and callously cruel against those who preach their faith in spiritual freedom.”<sup>33</sup>*

Many of Tagore’s observations stand the test of time. As the artificial value of gold continues to replace the language of love, as social bonds break and the few manipulate the majority, it feels like we are coming closer and closer to re-enacting the story of the moon. It seems even more the case, when we recall

that “the cumulative greed of power and possession has no finality of completeness and no harmony with moral and spiritual perfection.”<sup>34</sup>

Tagore himself illustrated the consequences of this Systemic material and moral drain by addressing the relationship between fat cities and famished villages. The city concentrates energy and materials to satisfy its exaggerated appetite for modern civilization. To carry out its “abnormal devouring process,” the city conspires to feed upon other parts of the social body – most prominently, the villages. This process is ultimately suicidal, because “before the city’s progressive degeneracy ends in death, the disproportionate enlargement of a particular section looks formidably great and conceals the starved pallor of the entire body.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the city enables the illusion of wealth to survive, even as it sucks the life–blood, natural simplicity, and beauty out of the villages. When constant strain is put upon the village through the extortionate claim of ambition and its resources are exploited through the excessive stimulus of temptation, then it becomes poor in life. Its mind becomes dull and uncreative, and it is degraded to being the city’s slave, rather than its partner.<sup>36</sup> Most disheartening is the moral perversion in this ‘relationship’: the city believes that the village is its legitimate field for exploitation and that the village must give its life and happiness to maintain the luxuries and excesses of the city.<sup>37</sup>

Actually, the morally bankrupt relationship between the city and village appears only to be a microcosm of the problem that Tagore had with the System and its sense of Progress. The larger counterpart to the city is the Nation. "In the sense of a political and economic union of a people, [the Nation] is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose," such as capturing power, or conquering and controlling members of humankind.<sup>38</sup> The Nation is governed by the political or commercial man, whose only moral imperative is that all people should strain their physical, ethical, and intellectual resources to capture power and defeat the Other. Insidiously, the Nation hypnotizes people into believing that they are free, that forsaking their soul for the gain of power and profit is their own free choice.<sup>39</sup> In this way, the Nation tramples over the human soul, over the collective, and labels individual instincts for self-aggrandizement as 'good.' It uses abstractions, like those mentioned above, and relies on efficiency and rational intellect to completely deaden the moral sense of humanity.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the Nation is "the evil that contradicts all that is highest in Man;" it derives its wisdom from the complete distrust of truth, goodness, and love.<sup>41</sup>

Tagore linked this critique of the Nation to the even larger concept of modern Western civilization. As he explained, today's civilization is based on nationalism, on economics and politics and its consequent militarism, where men relinquish their freedom and humanity in order to conform to vast mechanical organizations.<sup>42</sup> The motives behind 'civilization' therefore are the forces of destruction, fueled by an appalling number of human sacrifices.<sup>43</sup> Mechanized forces are utilized to produce materials far in advance of human beings' capacity to assimilate and simplify them into harmony with nature and human needs. In this way, modern civilization efficiently organizes the energy of the Nation to extend man's power over his surroundings, in order that he may be able to possess everything that he can lay his hands upon and overcome every obstacle on his path to conquest. For civilization, this is the best ideal of perfection.<sup>44</sup> Thus, a constant high pressure of living, produced by an artificially cultivated hunger for material things, generates and feeds the energy that drives civilization upon its endless journey. Yet, like Tagore, we must ask ourselves how a material hunger can be "the principal driving force behind any great civilization."<sup>45</sup>

Tagore saw that India – as well as the rest of the East – was blindly imitating the West. In fact, it was competing vigorously with Western civilization by trying to produce its own Nation. Tagore knew that the West had come to India to

heartlessly exploit it for material gain, to overpower it with its greed and racism. But he was more disheartened by the fact that the East had abandoned/devalued its own wealth of wisdom, its own ideal of civilizational living, and its own sense of truth and replaced them with the Western mind and temperament.<sup>46</sup> While the West proclaimed its superiority, the East accepted its 'inferiority'. In fact, according to Ashis Nandy, Tagore was among the first to diagnose that the process and language of "identifying with the colonial aggressor" was emerging in India.<sup>47</sup> Tagore fully recognized the moral bankruptcy of both the native and foreign establishment, and he argued that India never had a sense of nationalism and was falsely borrowing from Western history and Western knowledge to re-create its past and prepare for its future. But such false appropriations would never lead India to the truth of its destiny.<sup>48</sup>

In particular, the rampant and relentless pursuit of scientific knowledge and mechanized technologies had taken root in India's appropriation and imitation of Western knowledge. Like Gandhi, Tagore was critical of these aspects of Western civilization. He saw that the titanic forces of intellect were overwhelming spiritual power and moral truths, that science was supplying the world with death-dealing weapons of bombs and poison gases, and that it was helping its votaries "crush the weak, rob those who are asleep, and exploit nature for impious ends."<sup>49</sup> Scientific knowledge was strengthening human power but was not contributing to the development of humanity.<sup>50</sup> Tagore realized that the reductionist tendency of science could not provide for or replace the wholeness — the beauty, art, truth, goodness, love — of human existence: "*That which merely gives us information can be explained in terms of measurement, but that which gives us joy cannot be explained by the facts of a mere grouping of atoms and molecules.*"<sup>51</sup> Similarly, technology negatively impacts on human life. Like countless other critics from Marx to Gandhi to Chomsky, Tagore believed that machinery promoted the pursuit of profit over people, and hollow materialism over deep and soulful connections. Technology encourages greater production and the building of monster factories, thereby uprooting workers' lives from their natural soil and creating unhappiness.<sup>52</sup> One can imagine that Tagore's critique would only intensify if he bore witness to the immense penetration of technology in all facets of our lives today.

Yet, although dissatisfied with their current configurations, Tagore did not wholly reject science and technology, as he had rejected Western civilization and the Nation. Rather, Tagore re-envisioned the role of science and technology. While rejecting its supremacy, he claimed that science also presented a form of



the truth (though notably, not the *whole* truth) and could serve its own useful purpose.<sup>53</sup> Scientific knowledge could assist humankind in overcoming disease and death, conquering pain and suffering, and realizing the universal in its physical aspect, just as spiritual knowledge enables man to realize the universal in its moral, spiritual aspect.<sup>54</sup> He applied the same qualification to machines and technology, arguing that the task was not to spiritualize the machine, but rather to spiritualize the human being using that machine.<sup>55</sup> In other words, Tagore placed the emphasis on the motivations behind the use of science and technology, calling for spiritual maturity over material impulsiveness, feeling over intellect, and humanity over brutality. In this regard, he also appeared to question the position that science had taken in a hierarchy of knowledge systems, by arguing that “in all knowledge, we know our own self in its condition of knowledge.”<sup>56</sup> That is, while each form of knowledge offers insights into the Self, none of them could purport to monopolize the entire domain of knowledge — for each possess its own limitations, narrowness in scope, assumptions, etc.

Tagore propagated a similar paradigm shift with regards to civilization. In contrast to the Western goal of spawning machinery to better control/fight Nature and other races, Tagore claimed that the Indian ideal of civilization focused on the contemplative life, the realization of the Infinite, and not success in economic, political, or military ascendancy.<sup>57</sup> Civilization was a creation of art, a continual discovery of our transcendental humanity, guiding us towards the objective realization of our vision of spiritual perfection.<sup>58</sup> Thus, Tagore envisioned that the next civilization would be based on worldwide social cooperation and spiritual ideals of reciprocity, and not on economic ideals of profit, competition, exploitation.<sup>59</sup> He held “simplicity of spiritual expression” as the highest product of civilization,<sup>60</sup> and believed that civilization existed to express Man’s *dharma* — the fullness of humanity — not merely to show off his cleverness, power, and possession.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, in reality, civilization could only be judged or prized by how much it had evolved and given expression to the love of humanity.<sup>62</sup>

Given this understanding of civilization, it is clear to see why Tagore attempted to root the concept of ‘nationalism’ in the Indian civilization and not in a nation-state heir to the British-Indian empire.<sup>63</sup> As Ashis Nandy explains, Tagore was an anti-imperialist *and* an anti-nationalist, for his version of patriotism rejected violence, rejected the concept of a single-ethnic Hindu *rashtra* (race) as anti-Indian and anti-Hindu, and rejected the nation-state as the main actor in Indian

political life.<sup>64</sup> In his view, the Nation stood in great contrast to *society*, which, as an end in itself, is a “spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being, a natural regulation of human relationships.”<sup>65</sup> In society, self-expressions — art, literature, philosophy, social symbols, and ceremonies — are different in different peoples, but they are not necessarily antagonistic, as the Nation holds them to be. Rather, this diversity “makes the world of man fertile of life and variedly beautiful, adding richness to our enjoyment and understanding of truth.”<sup>66</sup>

Tagore viewed India’s caste system, in its original state, as an attempt to appreciate and regulate diversity. Rather than exterminate or enslave different peoples, as was done in America and Australia, India tried to attain social unity while allowing for individual differences. The caste system anticipated and made room for diversity, and it linked trades and professions with castes, to prevent jealousy and competition. However, it failed to allow for life’s fluidity, movement and malleability, thereby ‘trapping’ individuals in “magnificent cage of countless compartments” and “reducing arts into crafts and genius into skill.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, while not downplaying its injustices or excusing its serious shortcomings, Tagore felt the caste system was — at least initially — a conscious attempt on India’s part to nurture diversity, social order, and cooperation. Although it did not succeed, because of the rigidity and unjust hierarchy that grew and prevailed in it over time, its intent was to reconcile the inherent complexities of diversity. Tagore thus reinforced the idea that human civilization always had a choice: different peoples could approach one another in a spirit of reconciliation and mutual cooperation, or they could fight one another in blind hatred, under the illusion of interminable competition.<sup>68</sup>

Tagore clearly held faith that the former was possible, and believed that Indian civilization, and the East as a whole, had much to offer the West in this process. Notably, he never wholly rejected the West and never encouraged the cultivation of hatred against it.<sup>69</sup> Nor did he perceive the East or West as monolithic entities, and recognized that injustice and beauty existed in both. However, he recommended that India link with its civilizational neighbors in the East, with whom he found much affinity, rather than using Europe or America as its guidepost. And he encouraged India and the East to rethink their relationship with the West, by first reflecting on themselves. India needed to shed its self-abasement and reclaim its responsibility to humanity by recovering its own mind, its own culture, and what is best and most permanent in its own history.<sup>70</sup> Given India’s spiritual progress and dedication to the universal, Tagore viewed

its mission as proving that *“love for the earth, and for the things of the earth, is possible without materialism, without the vulgarity of avarice.”*<sup>71</sup>

Again, the relationship between the city and the village helps to illustrate Tagore’s regenerative vision. Unlike B.R. Ambedkar, who labeled the village “a cesspool” and “a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and communalism,”<sup>72</sup> Tagore believed that the village had much to contribute to humanity. He felt, as Gandhi did, that they simply needed time and space to recuperate their self-sufficiency and vibrancy. Within his vision of civilization, villages would be afforded respect and dignity, a wealth of space in which to live, and a wealth of time in which to work, rest and enjoy life. In this way, the health and knowledge of the villages would be revived. And instead of parasitically draining the villages, the city would act like the streams, lakes, and oceans of humanity. They would gather and distribute wealth and knowledge in order to enrich the entire commonwealth.

However, Tagore recognized that *“such a relationship of mutual benefit between the city and village can remain strong only so long as the spirit of cooperation and self-sacrifice is a living ideal in society.”*<sup>73</sup> With this ideal in mind, Tagore advocated an existence in which the display of individual power, the might of nations, and other such perversions of the modern world were subordinate (if they existed at all).<sup>74</sup> Unlike many of his contemporaries, Tagore argued that the country did not need any particular material object, nor wealth, comfort or power, to achieve its ‘independence’. Rather, India required an awakening to its full consciousness in soul freedom, where neither enmity nor competition exists, where both collectives and individuals are beyond attacks.<sup>75</sup> In a system founded on these principles, social duties would emphasize sharing with fellow human beings, and real progress could only be achieved by giving away what one had.<sup>76</sup> By owning responsibility to the community, individuals would attain a special kind of freedom — a freedom in social relationship — and each person would gain collective power for his/her own welfare.<sup>77</sup> After depicting the monstrosity of the Nation, Tagore passionately urges India to take this path in his poem, “The Sunset of the Century”:

*“Be not ashamed, my brothers, to stand before the proud  
and the powerful  
With your white robe of simpleness.  
Let your crown be of humility, your freedom the freedom  
of the soul.  
Build God’s throne daily upon the ample bareness of*

*your poverty.  
And know that what is huge is not great and pride is not  
everlasting.”<sup>78</sup>*

Ultimately, Tagore envisioned *Swaraj* would be at the foundation of social, political, and economic institutions. Like Mahatma Gandhi, he did not reduce this term to a negative form of freedom, such as ‘independence from the British.’ Rather, for him, *Swaraj* was a positive freedom; it was the opportunity to re-create the country. Tagore believed that *Swaraj* would occur when individual people opened their minds to the fullest, and mind of the country exerted itself in all directions. For this reason, the strangulation tactics of India’s so-called ‘freedom-fighters’ disgusted Tagore. In the name of freedom from the outsiders (the British), Tagore felt that they pushed for obedience and conformity, not for truth or inner freedom.<sup>79</sup>

Despite the similarity in their views on de-colonization and *Swaraj*,<sup>80</sup> Tagore was also one of the few who could offer a rich and constructive criticism to Gandhi about his tactics. Gandhi, of course, saw the *charkha*<sup>81</sup> as a tool and symbol for achieving *Swaraj*, because it would develop both freedom from British rule (by rejecting British-made cloth and providing cloth/income for the Indian masses) and freedom within the self (given the type of self-discipline, concentration, and dedication required to use the *charkha*). But while Tagore agreed with Gandhi’s conception of *Swaraj* and had great admiration for him as a leader, he did not believe that the struggle for independence should be reduced to spinning a *charkha* or blindly heeding a leader’s orders. Tagore questioned how blind following could lead to *Swaraj*? For freedom, self-rule, and rule-over-the-self to grow in India, the spirit of inquiry had to be kept intact, and not be made timid or inactive by compulsion to follow leaders, trends, or social habits. Put more crudely, Tagore did not think that “twirling away one’s hands” would revive India from her paralysis. It would not break the inertia of its will or intellect, nor would it rouse the inward forces of deep thinking, wisdom, fellowship and mutual trust for cooperation that India so deeply needed for *Swaraj*.

Tagore believed that everyone had to contribute to making *Swaraj* a reality, by building it up with one’s service, ideas and activities. Gaining one’s own country means realizing one’s own soul more fully expanded within it, which requires actively engaging with the world, rather than passively standing by and letting ‘experts’ manage the system.<sup>82</sup> External work (through a *charkha* or otherwise)

can support this process, but only if it constantly stimulates the intellect and unites the lives of the countrymen in the pursuit of one great complete purpose.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, while the *charkha* had a role, Tagore's main contention was that it had been placed too high on a pedestal and given undue value, which hid — and therefore hindered — the comparatively more important processes of de-colonizing the mind, connecting with the spiritual, and creating diverse ways/paths to *Swaraj*.<sup>84</sup>

### Critiquing Education and Rediscovering Learning

*“Through their natural gift of guessing, children learn the meaning of word which we cannot explain. But it is just at this critical period that the child's life is brought into the education factory, lifeless, colorless, dissociated from the context of the universe, 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.*

— Rabindranath Tagore, “Educational Mission of the Visva-Bharati,” 1930

- What are the problems with India's mainstream education system?
- What should be the goals of learning?
- What kind of processes, relationships, and environments nurture learning?

Lifelong learning lies at the heart of Tagore's call for *Swaraj*. Critiquing and challenging colonial rule and institutions, recovering one's self and rediscovering one's civilization, exerting one's ideas and services to build *Swaraj* instead of a Nation — these actions demand deep learning at all levels, by all people in society. As both individual and systemic transformations are essential for *Swaraj*, it is not surprising that Tagore's entire framework for learning would reflect this belief. Nor is it surprising that Tagore was extremely critical of the existing schooling system (which continues to exist in the majority of the world). By exploring Tagore's critique of the school and his redefinition of the purposes, processes, relationships, and spaces for learning, it is clear that for Tagore, *Swaraj* requires a new paradigm of lifelong learning.

Tagore's total disdain for the school — for its teachers, its curriculum, and its environment — is a recurrent theme in countless lectures, essays, poetry, and plays.<sup>85</sup> Many of his critiques of schooling (as most people familiar with his life and work know) grow out of his own experiences as a boy and youth. Though

he experienced a combination of formal schooling and private tutoring, he recalls his feeling of great anguish upon first attending school:

*“...my whole heart rose in rebellion against an arrangement where there was no tinge of color, no play of life, where the lessons had no context with their surroundings, and where I was banished from that paradise, to which I had been born, where Nature dwells full of beauty — and this for no crime but that of being born ignorant.”*<sup>86</sup>

With such infamous memories, it is no wonder that Tagore dropped out of various schools in his youth and never actually completed his formal schooling. However, he thanked his school experience for cementing one concept in his mind: that school was a punishment that no child should have to endure. Drawing upon his own experiences, Tagore offered a multifaceted critique of schooling, ranging from its alienating impact on the individual, to the nature of its curriculum to the types of teacher–student relationships it fosters.

First, Tagore argued that the school alienates the child from Nature, for it fails to saturate the mind with the idea that the human world is in harmony with the natural world. In fact, it ignores this harmony with a severe, disdainful air of superiority. School encourages habits and knowledge that wean life away from nature and set the mind in opposition to the world.<sup>87</sup> Secondly, school alienates the child from him or herself. In striving for uniform results and averages, in devoting sole attention to transmitting information, the school refuses to take account of the individual and thereby fails to support the fulfillment of each person’s human potential. Instead, it acts as a tight-fitting encasement, pinching and bruising human nature on all sides, at every movement. Tagore’s classic story, “The Parrot’s Training,” takes this point to its logical end, when the metaphorical parrot — force-fed ‘Education’ through textbooks, with wings clipped and feet chained to his golden cage — dies.<sup>88</sup>

In fact, school has as its purpose to ‘civilize’ the non-civilized: to beat out their thirst for color, music, and movement of life.<sup>89</sup> Tagore saw childhood<sup>90</sup> as a period of life where one is free from the narrow bounds of social and professional conventionalism of the adult world; but school promotes just that kind of dull conformity with its standard curriculum and examinations system.<sup>91</sup> From its lifeless, mechanical routines to its impatient, domineering teachers and administrators, to its coercive punishments, the current process of education aids the System in disintegrating the human personality. It does nothing to train the mind for realizing its deeper spiritual relationship with the Supreme Truth.

Rather, it accentuates a break between one's intellectual, physical, and spiritual life, by killing the spirit of liberty in the mind, the spirit of adventure in life, and the spirit for learning new things.<sup>92</sup>

Tagore also noted unfortunately that the majority of teachers and administrators were people “who ought to have had for their vocation that of an executioner or prison-warden.”<sup>93</sup> Obsessed with acting as ‘grown-up persons’ and ‘learned men’, teachers do not realize that they must be like children in order to teach them well. In fact, most teachers burden the child with their adult manners and completely lack the sympathy, understanding, and imagination required for interacting with children. The schooling administration forces book lessons, immobile desks, and exams upon children, completely killing their opportunity to freely create their own world. In contrast to Tagore’s sense of the human being, they consider children to be products for display or monkeys to be trained, instead of human beings with treasured minds and spirits, who are creators in their own right. But to understand the human being in this way would contradict the purposes of “the tyrant, the schoolmaster, the educational administration, the government, each of whom want the child to grow up according to the pattern set for themselves.”<sup>94</sup>

As a sharp challenge to the present reality of education, Tagore articulated his own vision of lifelong learning. He saw four main goals in the purpose of learning: a) achieving unity with truth, b) integrating oneself into harmony with all existence, c) acquiring fullness in personality, and d) freeing the soul. The first goal essentially deals with engaging in a multifaceted search for truths and then unifying them with regards to the spiritual world, which Tagore regarded as the innermost truth of this world.<sup>95</sup> To recover and discover such unity, the different elements of individual human beings — their intellect, physical, and spiritual qualities — must be reintegrated. Tagore explained that in all human faculties or passions, there is nothing absolutely good or bad; they all are the constituents of the great human personality. However, occasionally wrong notes appear because they are in the wrong places. Therefore, the second purpose of education is to make such notes into chords that harmonize with the grand music of Man.<sup>96</sup> In fact, true wisdom results from finding the balance between individual human life and the rest of the world.<sup>97</sup>

However, human beings can only harmonize their life with all existence, when they have fully developed their personalities — the third goal of learning. This corresponds with Nature’s own purpose: “to make the boy/girl a full person

when s/he grows up — full in all directions, mentally and mainly spiritually.”<sup>98</sup> One must learn to nurture faculties for self-preservation, self-confidence, self-respect, and self-awareness, in order maintain individual life, experience the freedom of self-reliance, and live an organized existence.<sup>99</sup> Ultimately, learning must enable one to achieve the “highest purpose of man: the fullest growth and freedom of soul.”<sup>100</sup>

If these four goals are to be achieved, freedom is of utmost importance; it perhaps is the most significant element of the learning process advocated by Tagore. He believed that human beings, like birds and animals, have an active mind that seeks freedom for self-learning in order to create the world for themselves.<sup>101</sup> Put differently, real lifelong learning nourishes reasoning faculties to allow the mind freedom to explore the many facets in the world of truths. It cultivates the imagination to allow the mind freedom in the world of art; and it enriches human sympathy to allow the mind freedom in the world of human relationships.<sup>102</sup> To better understand the nuances of Tagore’s conception of this term ‘freedom’, I have divided it into three aspects: freedom of thought, freedom of movement, and freedom to create.

In congruence with his distaste for the narrow and lifeless curriculum offered in schools, Tagore encouraged full freedom of thought in his framework of learning. He believed that only pursuing immediate needs or clinging to practical reality leaves the mind dull. He expressed poetically: *“To discover freedom of outlook, the mind must soar into the upper air of abstraction, swim into the very heart of the infinite for the mere joy of it, and then fly back to its nest in the world.”*<sup>103</sup> Only through a path of freedom can the mind be free to achieve the various goals of learning. To attain unity, harmony, fullness, and to free the soul, the desire to learn anything and everything must be fostered in the children, which can only occur when “class-work” flows from the natural currents of freedom in daily life.<sup>104</sup> Such freedom not only cultivates the desire to learn everything, but it also fuels the growth of self-discipline and intrinsic motivation. Children do not rely on rewards or punishments to motivate them to learn (extrinsic motivation) but rather utilize the freedom they have to define, design, execute, and reflect on the learning they want to do (intrinsic motivation).

Freedom of thought must be accompanied by freedom of movement. Tagore valued the wealth of language in movement and insisted that to find expression for a single sentiment, all our limbs must be free to move and act. He saw the



process of thinking in two dialectic stages: the act of thought itself and the process of giving that thought an appropriate form. The rhythm of movement allows one to group, shape, and fully express one's thoughts.<sup>105</sup> For children, this is particularly important. They best gather knowledge and wisdom by acting upon their love for life, in all its color and movement. In fact, personal experience — using an array of bodily movements and directly engaging with persons, environments, or things — facilitates a very deep and natural learning process.

Not only does freedom of movement contribute to deep learning (as opposed to the more superficial, surface learning)<sup>106</sup>, but forcing children to be stationary, as teachers do in schools, can actually result in a disconnect between the mind and body, where both suffer as a result. Creative work actually depends on an integrated relationship between the body and the mind — the mind to coordinate ideas and thoughts, and the whole body to facilitate the expression of these thoughts.<sup>107</sup> Thus, the first two aspects of freedom coalesce to the third: the freedom to create.

As seen in the prior sections, Tagore lent exceptional value to creativity, perhaps more so than any other educationist in India. He harshly criticized the society that would forsake imagination and individual creative power in order to obsess over the artificial values of a particular manner of living and a particular style of respectability.<sup>108</sup> Instead, he believed that just as God himself finds freedom in creation, so must human beings create their own worlds to discover their freedom. Tagore also considered that creative freedom could emerge out of several areas. While dance, songs, drama, painting, poetry, and music could free the creative spirit, meditation would allow children to exert power of self-control, also essential to creative processes. Daily work, like drawing water and caring for one's surroundings, would build a spirit of self-help and self-reliance to further facilitate creativity, as well as to restore a dignity to labor.<sup>109</sup> This is not to say that Tagore thought that all constructive work, urged by daily needs, was necessarily creative. Rather, he confirmed the possibility that practical or constructive work — in the form of objects, ideas, or services — could be creative, if through doing it, human beings were giving expression to their own deeper consciousness of the infinite within.<sup>110</sup>

By advocating freedom in these various ways, in essence, Tagore challenged the paradigm of thinking that children could only learn by acting like ascetics in a monastic discipline of knowledge.<sup>111</sup> Though he never expressed it as such,

Tagore essentially afforded space and respect to the wide diversity of learning styles and interests that exist in human beings. He wanted children to have as many opportunities as possible to discover and uncover their Selves. Notably, Tagore developed his concept of freedom by drawing upon his experiences with children's minds. He was convinced that children's subconscious mind was more active than their conscious intelligence and that children had learned joyfully through their subconscious mind for generations, for it was completely integrated into the ebbs, flows, and energy of life.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, children need not be treated as 'empty vessels' or as 'passive receptors of information.' Rather, they simply needed to be afforded the freedom to learn as openly and actively as Nature intended. His poem "On the Seashore" expresses this idea:

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

*The infinite sky is motionless overhead the restless water is boisterous. On the seashore of endless worlds the children meet with shouts and dances.*

*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...*

*Tempest roams in the pathless sky, ships are wrecked in the trackless water, death is abroad and children play.*

*On the seashore of endless worlds is the great meeting of children."<sup>113</sup>*

Clearly this emphasis on freedom would call for an utter transformation of the role of teachers and administrators in the education system, and Tagore certainly had his own version of radical pedagogy<sup>114</sup> to correspond to his learning goals and processes. At the root of his pedagogy was love, just as at the root of his understanding of the human being was love. Freedom did not merely mean unrestricted space to think, move, and create; it also manifests itself in an unrestricted human relationship of love, trust, and mutual respect.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, for Tagore, love is a form of freedom, and it is this freedom in relationship that children should share with their teachers.

How to build such a relationship? For one, Tagore believed in the soul of man, much more than rigid methods of teaching. In congruence with his vision of *Swaraj*, he expected the soul — and its quest for truth, unity, goodness, harmony, etc. — to be the starting point for developing new types of learning relationships. Secondly, for Tagore, the ideal teacher realizes that "to teach is to learn."<sup>116</sup> That is, teachers would communicate to children that they are all travelers on similar paths, working towards similar goals of self-liberation.

Under no circumstances would the teacher stand at an immense distance ahead of children. From their common understanding and platform, children and teachers would share in a life of simplicity and spiritual growth, giving and gaining to one another in equal measure. Teachers would recognize that where the eagerness to teach is too strong, the result becomes meager and mixed with untruth.<sup>117</sup> And children would be seen and understood as living beings, whose health and development depend upon a guiding spirit of personal love.<sup>118</sup>

Because children have an active sub-conscious mind, then like a tree, they have the power to gather their nourishment and stimulus from the surrounding atmosphere. Tagore felt that the earth, with its colors, perfumes, music, movements, self-revelation, and continual wonders of the unexpected, was in itself a perpetual learning experience. In fact, the natural atmosphere for learning was far more significant than rules and methods, buildings, appliances, class teachings, or textbooks.<sup>119</sup> Tagore's outlook on relying on simplicity and Nature for providing learning 'inputs' contrasts greatly with the classroom/building/textbook/input-driven system of education that exists today. In congruence with theorists of intergenerational and constructivist learning, Tagore felt that organizations and individuals engaged in learning processes together must abandon their habits of mechanical toil and extraction. Instead, they needed to collaborate with Nature and utilize the world as their learning space and its life as their stimuli. In this way, they would be able to create an atmosphere for developing the sensitiveness of the soul and for affording mind its true freedom of sympathy.<sup>120</sup>

Tagore himself attempted to create such a soulful atmosphere in an ashram at Santiniketan. He called it the "living temple" he attempted to build for his divinity, and claimed that *"in such a place education necessarily becomes the preparation for a complete life of man, which can only be possible by living that life, through knowledge and service, enjoyment and creative work."*<sup>121</sup> At Santiniketan, Tagore tried to actualize the learning processes, roles, and visions described above, and through them, tried to present an experience of living towards *Swaraj*. In the second section, I explore what he intended this place to be, what it appears to be today, and what accounts for the discrepancy between the two.

## Section 2: Tagore's Experience in Santiniketan

*"It must be an ashram where men have gathered for the highest end of life, in the peace of nature; where life is not merely meditative, but fully away in its activities; where boys' minds are not being perpetually drilled into believing that the idea of the self-idolatry of the nation is the truest ideal for them to accept; where they are bidden to realize man's world as God's Kingdom to whose citizenship they have to aspire; where the sunrise and sunset and the silent glory of stars are not daily ignored; where nature's festivities of flowers and fruit have their joyous recognition from man; and where the young and the old, the teacher and the student, sit at the same table to partake of their daily food and the food of their eternal life."*

— Rabindranath Tagore, "My School," 1917

In this section, I will explore how Tagore attempted to actualize his ideas about lifelong learning, society, and the human being in Santiniketan. What originally began as an ashram grew over time into 'residential school'/research center. Two decades later, in 1921, Santiniketan was institutionalized as a university (Visva-Bharati), from which a rural institute, a rural school, and several colleges followed. Visva-Bharati was made a central university in 1951, and it continues to expand with additional colleges, departments, and disciplines even today. While others<sup>122</sup> have written at length about the history of Santiniketan, I choose not to focus on specific dates and events, and instead concentrate more on the expectations that Tagore had for the 'Abode of Peace' and how it has evolved over time.

Broadly speaking, Santiniketan<sup>123</sup> has changed dramatically in its lifetime. It started out as a radical challenge to the (then-British) government system/model of education. Indeed, in its conception and early days, it seemed to be Tagore's own version of de-schooling, de-institutionalizing, and building Swaraj. As the above description indicates, Santiniketan was to be a place where children and adults would gather together to live, learn, and create the future in ways congruent with Tagore's ideas around human existence, freedom, and Swaraj. They would neither accept the System as is, nor would they withdraw from the realities of the world; rather, they would draw upon Nature's wonders and each other to uncover and discover other ways of living, being, and relating.

Later, towards the end of Tagore's life and shortly after his death, Santiniketan appeared to become more like an 'alternative school'; it had lost its radical edge

but still maintained some of its uniqueness (when compared against the rest of the education system). Today, Santiniketan is quickly becoming more and more in tune with the mainstream model of education that Tagore so strongly opposed. To understand this metamorphosis, I will explore what Santiniketan was originally like, what it is like today, and what accounts for the vast differences between the two.

### **What Was Santiniketan Originally Like?**

Tagore attributed the origin of the ashram at Santiniketan to the memory of his own school days. As mentioned earlier, he found his entire school experience utterly traumatic, hating it for its denial of Nature, its disintegration of human personality and wholeness, its suppression of freedom and creativity. But though he did not have to serve the “full penal term” of school, he was glad that he did not totally “escape from its molestation,” for it gave him knowledge of the wrong from which children suffer.<sup>124</sup> The *Brahmacharyasrama*, founded in 1901, utilized this initial knowledge, which later expanded into his full repertoire of ideas on learning (discussed in the last section). Tagore also drew inspiration from the ancient educational bodies of India, the *gurukul* and *tapovan*, and particularly their integration with Nature and the relationships between ‘masters’ and ‘disciples’.

What is important to remember in understanding Santiniketan is that **Tagore never wanted Santiniketan to be a school**. Given his adverse feelings about schooling, and his total conviction that learning and the real purposes of living could not emerge from such a system, he completely rejected the concept of a ‘school’ for what was to be created at Santiniketan. Instead, he sought to re-define what community living would mean in the larger contexts of the discovering human beings’ full potential and of societal transformation towards nurturing *Swaraj*. From this, he attempted to actualize the kinds of learning spaces, opportunities, and relationships essential to this vision of community living. Santiniketan was to epitomize freedom in the truest sense of the Freedom Struggle. It was to be a place where one could not only be free from the constraints of the present system and models of education, but also be free to regenerate the individual, community, and society in creative, unique, and diverse ways in order to live *Swaraj* in the post-British era.

Judging from accounts of former students of Santiniketan in its early years, and from Tagore’s own writings, the *Brahmacharyasrama*<sup>125</sup> was anything but a school. First, its atmosphere was quite extraordinary. In congruence with

Tagore's belief that simplicity/ austerity/poverty facilitated rich learning about the divine and the natural, the material and physical resources of the ashram were quite limited. But the natural surroundings of Santiniketan were vast and remarkable: open air, solemn rivers, expansive plains of prickly shrubs, red gravel and pebbles, date-palm and sal trees, amalaki and mango groves, the earth stretching its brown arms, the air enveloping everyone in its warmth.<sup>126</sup> Children were free to move about this incredible scenery as they liked: to climb trees, swim in rivers, run, dance, skip throughout the vast open country surrounding the ashram. They wore no shoes, socks, or slippers, for Tagore believed that they should neither be deprived of their freedom, nor should they be deprived of the learning contexts that nature provided them — to intimately know the earth by touch.<sup>127</sup> As he explained, "To alienate our sympathy from the world of birds and trees is a barbarity, which is not allowed in my institution."<sup>128</sup>

The freedom and beauty afforded by these natural settings completely transformed how one learned 'subjects' in Santiniketan. Although Tagore still appeared to categorize knowledge into 'disciplines', there seemed to be more fluidity and flexibility, both among them as disciplines and in how they were taught. For example, Tagore described how children at Santiniketan learned botany. By climbing a tree, they discovered where to find a foothold on an inhospitable trunk, how far they can take liberty with the branches, how to distribute their body weight among the branches, and how to use trees for gathering fruits, taking rest, or hiding from undesirable pursuers. Thus, rather than acquiring an impersonal knowledge of trees and plants through isolated, textbook science studies of chlorophyll and carbon, the children utilized personal experience to realize the living existence of trees.<sup>129</sup> Here, the first important lesson for children to learn was improvisation, for learning was never imposed on them by autocratic authorities. Rather, Santiniketan was their own world to fully and freely react to and create in.<sup>130</sup>

Such an atmosphere thus gave birth to a diversity of learning opportunities at Santiniketan. In the early morning, children would rise, ready themselves, and then participate in 15 minutes of meditation, contemplating the divine, chanting Sanskrit verses, or simply remaining quiet and exerting the power of self-control.<sup>131</sup> Subjects learned in the open air, under the shade of trees, would follow, including music, picture-making, and dramatic performances — activities that were the expression of life.<sup>132</sup> Sports and games also were amply played — volleyball, badminton, and even jujitsu!<sup>133</sup> Children also engaged in

vigorous work: sweeping, making beds, washing dishes, drawing water, cooking, weaving, and gardening. These joyous exercises of inventive and constructive energies helped to build up character, enabled the children to take responsibility, think and manage for themselves (instead of idly grumbling about deficiencies), and, by their constant movements, naturally swept away all accumulations of dirt, decay, and death.<sup>134</sup>

Creativity, invention, and constructive efforts were also celebrated through various season-festivals: the *Basantotsab* (Spring Festival) and *Paushotsab* (Harvest and Culture Festival). Tagore believed that changes of season corresponded to changes in mindset. He visualized the festivals as a way to develop spirituality, where people would have the opportunity to unite themselves with Nature through song, dance, hymns, drama, and simple, aesthetically beautiful decorations of flowers, *alpana* and *rangoli* (indigenous colors made of vegetables). Each festival would leave an impact on every person in Santiniketan, one that would sustain throughout the season until the next festival arrived. They provided “a spiritual education, an aesthetic education, a total education.”<sup>135</sup>

In these many ways, the environment and spaces for learning were constructivist and collaborative in nature; that is, each person created their own world in Santiniketan and contributed to the creation of the whole Santiniketan. While Tagore’s songs and plays were often utilized, children also wrote and improvised their own plays and songs. They had a literary club and produced several illustrated magazines. Of course, in keeping with Tagore’s belief about language, and its significance for self-knowledge and self-expression, every thing was written, spoken, sung in local Indian languages, of them, primarily Bengali. Also, because Tagore opposed autocratic authority, children also had their own place in school administration, along with their own court of justice. They were free to participate in whatever they liked and free to create their own learning agenda, attending whatever subjects they liked, at whatever level they wished. For example, a child could simultaneously be studying the first ‘level’ of mathematics, the fifth ‘level’ of Bengali, and the third ‘level’ of English.<sup>136</sup> Also, since prizes, competitions, and ranks did not exist in Santiniketan, neither did jealousy nor inferiority/superiority complexes among students. They recognized the diversity of their talents, but felt proud of one another’s successes and saw themselves as belonging to part of a greater whole.<sup>137</sup>

And although various religious, regional, and caste groups were represented, few tensions or conflicts occurred in Santiniketan. The heterogeneity posed little problem, for people did not attempt to argue specific dogma or creeds, nor could separatist tendencies thrive for long. Tagore recounted examples of how, at first, the Brahmins refused to eat or work with the non-Brahmins. In fact, they hated to do any work for the common good, in which others would derive some advantage, or any work they believed was fit to be done by a servant.<sup>138</sup> Rather than force the children to cooperate, and contradict his faith in freedom, Tagore allowed them to remain separate. However, one by one the Brahmins abandoned their hierarchical attitude and joined the group. They could neither stand to be left out from the whole, nor could they resist the impact of their activities, which demonstrated the reality of moral principles in life.<sup>139</sup> Children from affluent families also did not receive any special advantage; they shared the same life and lived on equal terms with everyone else.<sup>140</sup> In contrast to the school, which thrives on segmentation and narrows children's minds into prejudice and ignorance, Santiniketan was being built upon the ideal of the spiritual unity of all peoples, as diverse parts of a divine humanity, just as Tagore intended.<sup>141</sup> Children from all walks of life came together, learned together, and grew together, to realize their shared spirit and common search for truths and *Swaraj*.

Another of Tagore's direct challenges to the present schooling system was the relationship he encouraged between students and teachers. They lived together in small simple huts, which they cared for and managed together as well. Not only did a familial feeling abound, but the understanding was that students and teachers were on similar paths, openly learning together, daily growing together, towards the emancipation of their minds into the consciousness of the infinite.<sup>142</sup> Private tuitions were unheard of; rather, students were free to ask teachers questions at any time and readily received special attention if they were struggling in the learning process.<sup>143</sup> Also, a number of teachers, both from various parts of India and from around the world, came to Santiniketan to share and learn with each other and with the children. As Tagore, along with other artists, researchers, thinkers, did their work, children were free to watch, listen, ask questions, and sometimes participate in the process.<sup>144</sup> This form of intergenerational learning stands in sharp contrast with much of present-day academia, where ideas are jealously guarded and quickly copyrighted as 'intellectual property' to keep up with the increasing commodification of knowledge.



Tagore gives the example of one of the original teachers of Santiniketan, Satish Chandra Roy, to illustrate how teachers were to be. Roy did not confine the children to a classroom, but rather gave them access to every space in the area. He completely trusted the children's capacity of understanding, and therefore talked and read with them at his own level. (He also trusted the children themselves and did not see them as *shatans*, unlike what many current teachers believe.) And he did everything to ensure that the children's minds would be roused: Roy made his teaching personal and made it of life, drawing upon his own intense interest in life, in ideas, in the environment, and in the children.<sup>145</sup> This was what Tagore felt most contributed to Roy's success as a teacher — using his own life, his words and actions, and the natural environment as the media through which to learn with the children.

As Brahmacharyasrama grew, it was re-named *Patha Bhavana*, or 'Abode of Learning', but the fundamental principles did not change. Indeed, such a climate of learning permeated the many spaces of Santiniketan. For example, although art pervaded all of Santiniketan, *Kala Bhavana*, the 'Abode of Art', was never meant to be understood as simply an 'art college'. Rather, it was to make "an effort to aesthetize the whole community — by encouraging creativity in children; motivating grown-ups to develop their inborn skills towards some creative pursuits; having a calendar...of music/drama/dancing; and making them respond to their environment with love and empathy."<sup>146</sup> The renowned artists, Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Beil, and Benodbihari Mukhopaddhaya, contributed to developing such a free and creative space, through their informal and loving interactions, simplicity in living, encouragement for self-assessment by all, openness to experimentation and to other disciplines, and sensitivity to human and natural life.<sup>147</sup>

Similarly, *Visva-Bharati* — literally 'Knowledge of the World', which Tagore founded in 1921 and under which all the learning spaces of Santiniketan and Sriniketan fall today — invoked the motto, *Yatra Visvam Bhavatyekanidam*: "All the world in one nest." Tagore saw the aim of Visva-Bharati as acknowledging "the best ideal of the present age" by offering a new education on the basis of a wider relationship to humanity.<sup>148</sup> Visva-Bharati was not meant to be like the traditional universities of the day, "whose gifts are for a few, producing a language and a mental diet that remain foreign to the multitude."<sup>149</sup> Rather, it was meant to enable India to fully know itself — to know the real wealth of knowledge produced and cherished in the varied life of India — in order to make itself known to others, to fulfill its responsibility of sharing its wisdoms with the

rest of the world. Visva-Bharati was also meant to break down the artificial modes of exclusion — armaments, prohibitive tariffs, passport regulations, national politics and diplomacies — that were crushing people and creating deformities in their moral nature.<sup>150</sup> During Tagore's lifetime, people from all over the world came together, shared their disciplines, knowledges, ideas, understandings, and fostered a true world center of learning in rural Bengal.

*Siksha-Satra*, 'Place of Education'<sup>151</sup> carried forward and further expanded Tagorean beliefs about learning, knowledge, freedom and creation. Growing out of the two years of experience of the Institute for Rural Reconstruction at Sriniketan ('Abode of Beauty'), and out of 21 years of experiences at Santiniketan, *Siksha-Satra* was founded in 1924. It was set up separately from Santiniketan, partly because Tagore had become frustrated with the way Santiniketan was changing (or deteriorating in his terms) and partly because he hoped to understand how his beliefs would actualize in a rural environment with rural children. According to L.K. Elmhirst, the American agriculturalist who assisted Tagore in developing the rural experiment, the aim of *Siksha-Satra* was "to provide the utmost liberty within surroundings that are filled with creative possibilities, with opportunities for the joy of play that is work — the work of exploration — and of work that is play."<sup>152</sup>

As was originally intended in *Patha Bhavana*, children in *Siksha-Satra* received a field for self-expansion and had full freedom to grow. Yet, in all its activities, there was recognition of the need for individual self-preservation, as well as the duties, responsibilities, and privileges of family membership and citizenship. Therefore, 'house-craft' (cooking, personal hygiene, individual self-discipline, group self-government) and handicraft (pottery, carpentry, dyeing, sewing), along with engaging with nature, interacting with the local knowledge and life of the community, and freeing one's imagination, were all normal parts of the *Siksha-Satra* experience.<sup>153</sup>

Also like *Patha Bhavana*, the teacher took "his rightful place, behind the student, ever on the watch, ever ready with a word of advice or encouragement, ever ready to be student himself, but never in the way."<sup>154</sup> In other words, the teacher let Nature take responsibility in the learning process. He held faith in the child's capacity, stood by and watched mistakes being made without interfering, and allowed both imagination and discipline to grow organically in the child. Drawing his inspiration from Tagore, Elmhirst reiterated that only through the fullest development of all of their capacities are human beings likely to achieve

real freedom. He wrote: "To have discovered the best means of self-expression as an individual, as a citizen, and as a creative agent, and to experience the daily delights and the difficulties of perpetual growth — this is true freedom."<sup>155</sup>

Perhaps it is for the successes that were being achieved at Siksha-Satra that, in 1937, as he was nearing the end of his life, Tagore wrote,

*"I myself attach much more significance to the educational possibilities of Siksha-Satra than to the school and college departments of Santiniketan, which are every day becoming more and more like so many schools and colleges elsewhere in the country: borrowed cages that treat the students' minds as captive birds, whose sole human value is judged according to the mechanical repetition of lessons, prescribed by an educational dispensation foreign to the soil."*<sup>156</sup>

The above quote illustrates how, despite Tagore's best efforts, Santiniketan was losing the character he intended it to have. Tagore recalled with sadness the numerous obstacles he faced in attempting to live out his beliefs: "The tradition of the community which calls itself educated, the parents' expectations, the upbringing of the teachers themselves, the claim and the constitution of the official University were all overwhelmingly arrayed against the idea I had cherished."<sup>157</sup>

Santiniketan also suffered from chronic funding problems. Tagore was not able to attract contributions from his countrymen, not even enough to support an institution in which so few children were participating.<sup>158</sup> Moreover, he had refused to take funds from the government, for he knew to do so would both drastically undermine his entire belief system, as well as reduce the amount of flexibility he would have to challenge the dominant educational model and nurture other forms of education. Unfortunately, lack of funds, along with the pressures of the outside system — for taking the Calcutta University examination, for having a formal degree, for teaching traditional subjects in the traditional way — took their toll on Santiniketan, even in Tagore's day.

### **What is Santiniketan Like Today?**

*"One may fondly desire that one's own design should survive, but that is an idle conceit. No one can predict what shape the course of time would give it. Whatever is true in it would triumph through space and time; whatever is narrow, limited and strictly personal should rightly perish."*

— Rabindranath Tagore,  
quoted in H.B. Mukherjee, Education for Fullness:  
A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore,  
1962

Towards the end of his life, Tagore had seen how Santiniketan was becoming more and more like a mainstream school. The preceding quote perhaps captures a moment when Tagore had attempted to come to terms with the frustration he felt and distance himself personally from his despair about Santiniketan's change. But while he is right that no one can predict how an institution will change over time, one would also hope that he was right that the many truths he believed in would triumph over space and time. Unfortunately, judging from intensive observations and interviews conducted over a three-week period in Santiniketan and Calcutta, this does not appear to be the case. Santiniketan has changed dramatically. While many of the formal structures Tagore instituted do remain, the spirits of interdependence, mutual learning, freedom and creation have nearly completely disappeared. In the following section, I will describe both the observations made by me personally and those made by current and former teachers, students, and administrators of Santiniketan. It should be noted from the outset that the purpose of this critique is not to personally attack anyone, but to illustrate the nature of the problem in a constructive spirit of collaboration. The changes that have occurred can be categorized under two main categories: change in learning opportunities and processes and change in learning roles and responsibilities.

#### *Change in Learning Spaces, Opportunities and Processes*

Patha Bhavana, the most direct link to Tagore's Brahmacharyasrama, contains only a few remnants of his original vision and, unfortunately, most of these are quite superficial. Children no longer have the broad freedom for exploration and experimentation described above — the freedom that was at the foundation of Tagore's educational thought. At Patha Bhavana, they still wake early and participate in a morning 'prayer' (less meditation and reflection, more recitation), but then they divide themselves into their classes (class one, class two, etc.) and proceed through their day in subject after subject (Bengali, math, English, science, Hindi, drawing, dancing, etc.). Similarly, in Siksha-Satra, the multitude of activities Elmhirst and Tagore had envisioned have been reduced to standard subjects (Bengali, English, math, science) and a 'craft' subject, either wood-working, weaving, painting, or modeling. Though they also begin with a

morning ‘prayer’, Siksha–Satra’s hours and schedule otherwise conform to that of a typical school: 10:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The learning environment is also quite different. A bell sounds in between classes, at both ‘schools,’ giving children five minutes of freedom to move about, before the next class begins. This limited time could hardly offer the scope for climbing trees, running about, skipping, shouting, playing, dancing, exploring nature, experimenting, etc. that Tagore so clearly articulated. “Like a museum piece,” many classes still occur under the trees.<sup>159</sup> But there seems to be “an invisible wall” that outlines a classroom space and separates the child from Nature (although some claim that “Nature is unconsciously working on them”).<sup>160</sup> In both locations, the children wear uniforms, although they are not the jacket, tie, skirt uniform that plague many private elite schools in India. Every class I observed had children sitting in rows or lines, with the teacher in the front of the class space. Even the scenery has changed. Although much of the area is still relatively open and full of trees, the natural beauty of the place is marred by concrete buildings, paved roads with truck, bus, and car traffic, and an unfortunate amount of garbage and littering.

Notably, art, music and other forms of creative expression are no longer integrated into the life of Patha Bhavana and the larger community. Rather, they are taught as separate subjects, with their own formal structures and their own rigid mechanisms. For example, in the dance class I observed, children stood in lines and all performed the same dance, taught and choreographed by the teacher, who sat on a chair in front of them, observing and correcting them as needed.<sup>161</sup> In fact, it appears that creativity has faltered in the institution as a whole, attacked by both external commercial forces and internal conformist pressures. For example, “children come with ready-made images to copy, like Tin-Tin, Superman,” for their drawing classes.<sup>162</sup> Similarly, in Kala Bhavana, students “imitate those ‘successful’ artists and focus more on the press, on money, on being in the limelight, than on their own work.”<sup>163</sup> The inspiration for art stems from external commercial bodies rather than from one’s spiritual connection with Nature or the divine — a completely contradiction to Tagore’s beliefs.

Internally, one notes the demise of creativity in the festivals of Santiniketan. Far from the simple, spiritual beauty and spontaneous celebration that Tagore had envisioned, the “life has gone out” of the present day festivals.<sup>164</sup> The levels of participation by the people of Santiniketan have declined, while residents of the

mega-city of Calcutta descend on the festivals in the millions. This immigration has eliminated the local character of the festivals and has introduced negative occurrences (eve-teasing, littering, drinking alcohol) in the festivals. Within Santiniketan, efficiency has appeared to replace enthusiasm and energy.<sup>165</sup> For example, *alpana* and *rangoli* are done with aluminum stencils instead of free hand; little children are made ugly by dressing them in gaudy costumes and slathering them in heavy make-up.<sup>166</sup> Sadly, “the repeat, mechanical program [occurs] year after year,” the festivals are “filled with tourists and the bureaucrats dance around like jokers and clowns.”<sup>167</sup>

I witnessed a manifestation of this decline in the Sriniketan festival, the *Marg Mela*. Rather than being a celebration of rural craft, knowledge, and tradition, the fair seemed like any other in India: with people selling dishes and tools, posters of Hindi movie stars, cheap plastic toys, clothes and electronic gadgets. Only a few vendors, out of the approximately 150 present, were remotely related to the rural craft theme of the festival (they were selling pottery and beadwork jewelry). Songs and dances were occurring in a separate tent nearby, yet audience members seemed to take only a casual interest, talking freely amongst themselves and wandering in and out during performances. It was a struggle, in vain, to find something of Tagore in this spectacle.<sup>168</sup>

Unfortunately, the deterioration of creativity is not only visible in festivals. *Sahito Sabha* — the literary evening which Tagore had initiated as a forum in which children, teachers, and all members of the Santiniketan community could share their poetry, plays, songs, dances, and other creative expressions — seems equally mechanical today. Only a small percentage of the student population attending the evening (approximately 200 out of 1200), and of them, an even smaller percentage participated by performing individually (30 out of 200). Although children of all ages did get up, by their own accord, to recite their poems or essays, audience members were speaking throughout the recitations, particularly when a lengthy piece was being introduced. Similarly, there appeared to be a standard format in the musical performances. A large group of children, approximately 40–50 in number, would sing *Rabindrasangit* (a Tagore-composed song), while a small group, about four to eight, would dance in front of them in ‘Santiniketan’ style. Despite the differences in songs and groups, the same steps and the same style were utilized in every performance.<sup>169</sup>

For these reasons, it is easy to label both the festivals and Sahito Sabha as a kind of ‘ritualized Rabindranath’ – a learning opportunity initiated by Tagore, that technically remains in structure but lacks the spirit he intended. Such ‘ritualism’ has two problematic effects. Not only does it eliminate the life and spirit of the ‘rituals’, but while using up valuable time and resources, it also prevents children and adults from being innovative and developing new learning experiences. Indeed, in discussions I had, no one mentioned the existence of any ‘positive’ aspect of Santiniketan that Tagore himself had not initiated. While tradition can have great significance and value in an institution, it is equally important to remember the purpose behind the tradition, rather than simply carrying out its motions. For Tagore, holistic experiences like the festivals and Sahito Sabha were invitational opportunities for children and adults to come together, create, perform, and learn in different spaces; they were not meant to be fossilized ‘activities’, repeated in form and content year after year. In staking itself so rigidly to these rituals, Santiniketan seems to forsake its chance to innovate on these experiences and/or carve out other interesting opportunities based on similar principles.

In addition to the loss of creativity, the flexibility and freedom afforded to an individual child’s ability now appears to be absent. Children are now confined to their class; they do not have the option of taking courses according to their level or interest. While the teachers of Patha Bhavana and Siksha–Satra still have the option to develop their own curriculum, for the most part, they simply correspond to the West Bengal state curriculum or follow Santiniketan’s existing curriculum in their subject.<sup>170</sup> Examinations and tests – which Tagore completely abhorred as being antithetical to real learning – occur regularly at Patha Bhavana. In the few days of classes I observed at Santiniketan, I saw children of all ages, taking tests or ‘being tested’ in their various classes. They seemed to accept these as part of the normal routine, and teachers described the school as “examination–oriented.”<sup>171</sup>

However, not everyone has taken such changes in stride. Supriyo Tagore, the former principal of Patha Bhavana (and great–great nephew of Rabindranath Tagore), recalls a student who was wonderful at sculptures and playing percussion. “His fingers could talk; they had magic. Unfortunately, he could not learn English.” The principal fought and fought to bring him up until the 10<sup>th</sup> class, but he could not help him pass the final examination. “He failed twice, thrice, and now he sells poultry here [in Bolpur]. He would have been a great artist. He had creativity. He would have been a better citizen than his peers

who could read and write. For such a thing to happen in Tagore's institution is a crime."<sup>172</sup>

The same principal also mentioned with sadness, that fear and competition are also part of the curriculum: "Fear is used today as a weapon, for discipline, which is totally contradictory to Tagore. Then there is competition, where [children] are taught that to be successful in [their] life, [they] have to defeat [their] friends. [They] become self-interested, taking no interest in [their] fellow man. Competition is becoming stronger here."<sup>173</sup> The pressure for competition appears to be coming from children, parents and school administrators, most likely in response to what they see as a 'normal' part of the current world. I witnessed an example of this feeling on "Sports Days", where children and youth competed in various running, jumping, and throwing activities for prizes and rewards.<sup>174</sup>

### *Change in Learning Roles and Relationships*

The learning roles and relationships at Santiniketan also appear to have drastically changed. While there originally seemed to be a spirit of hospitality and companionship in the relationships between students, between students and teachers, and between the University and the local community, "it is not like that today." Rather, "it is gradually becoming like other colleges,"<sup>175</sup> where teachers and students do not know one another, students fight among themselves or engage in foolish activities, and the University has absolutely disassociated itself from the local surroundings.

Very few teachers live with their students today, as the residential character of the school has dramatically been reduced. This means that teachers do not spend the kind of time learning with the children that Tagore envisioned they would. Instead, teachers come to teach their classes in the morning and when classes are over, they leave and return to their private homes. Much to the dismay of the principal of Patha Bhavana, few teachers attend functions or programs of the school, including weekly prayer and Sahito Sabha.<sup>176</sup> Indeed, even during special events, like 'Sports Days', in which classes are suspended, very few teachers participate or attend.<sup>177</sup> In one interviewee's opinion, the majority of the staff today "are mercenaries, who only come for the money, who don't love the place, and who don't care to work."<sup>178</sup> They seem to be a far cry from the teachers of the past, who came to Santiniketan out of a love for Tagore and a love for the ideals of the place. Although some teachers are open to thinking about and discussing Tagore, Santiniketan, and their own practices in



relation to the two, these teachers seem to be the exception rather than the rule.<sup>179</sup>

In terms of pedagogy, the majority of the teachers also appear to have strayed from Tagore. Many follow conventional pedagogic methods, where ‘teaching’ is ‘transmission’ and ‘pouring information’, where teachers are the sole keepers of knowledge, and where the child should give the right answer or be punished. That the children feared the teacher was evident in the class that I spent a significant amount of time with at Siksha–Satra. I was also told by various sources that punishments — even corporal punishment — was a common enough occurrence at both schools. One interviewee explained his granddaughter often did not even want to go to school (in this case, Patha Bhavana). She was not very good in studies, and the teachers neither took an interest in her nor in their own teaching, so she found it very dull.<sup>180</sup> Therefore, worse than not using life itself as the foundation for ‘teaching’ (in Tagore’s generative sense of the term), many teachers today do not even appear to care for individual children. Rather, they seem simply bent upon finishing a course and giving an exam.<sup>181</sup> Such learning relationships seem to be worlds apart from Tagore’s vision and belief.

Nor do students appear to take responsibility for their own learning. This passivity partly results from teacher attitude and the structures of the university. However, many interviewees felt that if students were motivated, they still had the scope to do things differently. For example, a mutual learning relationship had existed in the past, where senior students would give lectures that were attended by teachers. This mutual respect and interest grew out of Santiniketan’s spirit of valuing the intrinsic worth of all human beings, and not just the existence of ‘smart’ students.<sup>182</sup> Unfortunately, few students today seemed to be self-motivated enough to cultivate their own learning agenda. For the most part, they are like students in any other school or college in India — completing their course in order to get their degree. Interdisciplinary study is rare, as is originality, creativity, and leadership among students. The majority of the students come from neighboring villages, which has entirely eliminated the residential character of Siksha–Satra and greatly reduced that of Patha Bhavana (900 day–scholars vs. 300 residents). Therefore, like their teachers, the vast majority of students come in the morning, attend classes, and then depart for their private homes in the evening. They neither participate in the Visva–Bharati’s special functions, nor do they engage with the atmosphere of Santiniketan for more than a few hours a day.

### **What Accounts for This Downward Spiral?**

*“According to me, this is no longer Tagore’s Santiniketan. This is just another university.”*

— Riten Mozumdar

*“It’s very unfortunate. The experiment that was started here, we have completely ruined.”*

— Supriyo Tagore

With such a decline in both the learning processes/opportunities and the learning roles/relationships throughout the institutions in Santiniketan, it is clear that things have not changed for the better. What perhaps is most telling of the evolution is that everyone refers to the various learning spaces as ‘schools’ or ‘colleges’ and to Visva-Bharati as a ‘university’, yet they are using these terms in their traditional sense, not with Tagore’s re-definitions. Even though Tagore himself saw that the situation was deteriorating in his own lifetime, how did things change so dramatically and rapidly in the nearly 60 years since Tagore’s death? Interviews and observations revealed three main reasons behind the changes: operational breakdowns, institutional co-optation, and conceptual gaps. These reasons also explain why those, like Supriyo Tagore, principal of Patha Bhavana for 22 years, failed in their own attempts to initiate changes along the lines of Tagore’s philosophy.

#### *Demographic Shift: Change in Populations*

Part of the reason Santiniketan has changed is due to a demographic shift. Primarily, the differences in both the student and teacher populations make it nearly impossible to ensure a unity of holistic learning experiences. The student population itself has multiplied by manifold, as the university has had to comply with different political demands made upon it. Also, Visva-Bharati has nearly completely lost its pan-Indian character (much less its international character) and has become extremely localized, with most students commuting daily to attend classes from nearby areas in West Bengal. With teachers no longer living with or near the students, and day scholars far outnumbering residential scholars in the university as a whole, a bifurcation in the atmosphere of Santiniketan was inevitable.<sup>183</sup> The loss of diversity and residential living prevents one of Visva-Bharati’s missions – to have ‘the whole world in one nest’ – and contributes to the demise of Santiniketan.

### *Institutional Co-optation — The Impact of the State and Market*

As he was nearing the end of his life, Tagore wrote to Gandhiji and asked him to take care of Santiniketan, which he described as “the cargo of my life’s best treasure.”<sup>184</sup> Given the chronic funding problems of the institution, Gandhiji passed the responsibility to Jawaharlal Nehru and asked him to ensure its survival. In 1951, Nehru made Visva-Bharati a central university, placing it under the University Grants Commission (UGC) and eliminating its funding problems forever. Unfortunately, this decision was completely antithetical to Tagore’s belief system. As mentioned earlier, he never wanted to take government funding, knowing that both his flexibility and ability to challenge the mainstream system would be fundamentally curtailed. History reveals that he was completely right in his apprehensions.

As a central university, Visva-Bharati has been forced to conform to UGC rules and regulations. As one former professor explains, “Bureaucrats do not care to make different rules for different places. So if one is not careful to preserve its own culture, then it is liable to fall into the rut [of the central universities].”<sup>185</sup> In other words, Visva-Bharati is now hindered by the fairly rigid structure it must follow, particularly along the lines of staffing. The Vice Chancellor is appointed through a commission set up in New Delhi, and teaching staff is also hired in this way. No longer handpicked by Tagore, they only need ‘vomit out’ enough of Tagorean ideas to satisfy the interviewers.<sup>186</sup> Given their lack of connection with Santiniketan and to Tagore’s ideas and beliefs, their only allegiance is to the central government (and to the large salaries they receive from it). Hence a ‘mercenary’/government mentality is assumed by all parties, and their only task becomes making the university conform to UGC regulations.

But it is a vicious cycle of standardization. The more it conforms, the more impossible it becomes to differentiate Visva-Bharati from the other central universities. Being a central university also encourages expansion, such that the sheer size of the university makes it impossible for it to enact Tagore’s principles.<sup>187</sup> Thus, in the quest to become a ‘strong’ central university, Visva-Bharati completely deviates from everything that made it unique in the first place.

On another level, there has been a commodification of Tagore. Truckloads of tourists visit Santiniketan on a daily basis, not to mention the millions from Calcutta who descend for special occasions. They come to see Tagore’s ashram,

the university, the schools, and completely disturb the atmosphere of the place. They act as voyeurs, observing classes, asking questions, and picnicking on campus, but they make no contribution to the learning space Tagore tried to create. According to one interviewee, “It’s one of the most vicious things that can happen to a university. Santiniketan was never a tourist center; it was just a place of learning, a center of learning and scholarship. Now at least 15 busloads of tourists come a day, dirty the place, ruin it. There are hundreds of hotels. It’s a disgrace.”<sup>188</sup> Among the children I interviewed, ‘no more tourists’ was the first response to the question, “What would you change about Santiniketan?”<sup>189</sup> Clearly, co-optation by the institutions of the State and the Market is a major impetus for much of the change described above.

### *Conceptual Gaps: Chasms in Understanding*

Another explanation for Santiniketan’s demise has been the huge gaps in conceptualizing Tagore’s ideas and comprehending his vision for these many spaces for learning. Teachers totally lack any orientation to Tagore; at Patha Bhavana and Siksha–Satra, they receive absolutely no training in his educational ideas, pedagogy, or conceptual framework.<sup>190</sup> While they are afforded the freedom that Tagore desired — to ‘teach’ in their own unique ways — they often appear to act in ways at odds with his foundational principles. Competition, fear, discipline, exams, and pressure have replaced the freedom, creativity, self-discovery, collaboration, mutual respect, and love he held at the heart of learning and living. It seems that teachers have tended to reproduce their own schooling experiences, and have had difficulty escaping the mindset and expectations of mainstream schooling.

Similarly, students and parents neither appreciate, nor have any orientation to, Tagore. As with children I met in Patha Bhavana, Siksha–Satra students knew nothing about Tagore, beyond what they have read of his plays and poetry or sung of his songs. They had a difficult time articulating the meaning behind the mantra they recite every morning, simply seeing it as a prayer they used when asking for good luck on their examinations. In fact, the vast majority of students matriculate for a certificate and for security into the upper levels of education, not for any special feeling for Tagore. Once they received admission into Patha Bhavana or Siksha–Satra, they have “a very clear, easy way, right through Ph.D.; and if they are politically connected, they can get employment in the university.”<sup>191</sup> Parents put a lot of pressure on students, especially boys, to get good marks and a good career. Girls, on the other hand, are sent to Patha Bhavana as a “finishing school” for the training in dance, music, etiquette and

culture, to prepare them for marriage.<sup>192</sup> This misunderstanding would be Tagore's worst nightmare – completely the opposite of what he intended Santiniketan to be.

Nor are most students the 'freedom fighters' Tagore had hoped they would be. While some interviewees did note some unique qualities in the children who graduated from Santiniketan — a sense of freedom (to make particular choices or to exercise their own tastes) and a feeling of self-confidence (which can degenerate into arrogance at times) — most students go on to be absorbed into the mainstream after graduation.<sup>193</sup> Many pursue MBA degrees to match the economic market; others go into teaching, research, or the arts (particularly from Kala Bhavana). Most interviewees did not feel that the majority of graduates went on to live with Tagore's vision of challenging the System, building *Swaraj* or harmonizing themselves with the spiritual and divine. Instead, while some initially are displeased with the larger system and try to make changes within their work spaces or homes, most adjust eventually and become part of the status quo.

In the administration, what Santiniketan was intended to be is also either completely confused or nearly opposite to Tagore's beliefs. For example, the current principal seems to think that Patha Bhavana should be an 'elite' school. He explained that the school had a "quality problem," and therefore it could not meet the demands of parents for a "status-oriented" school: "We don't have facilities, libraries, etc. We aren't an English-medium school. If we started bilingual instruction, then we could admit other students. There is no system of screening. Now in a class, there are backward students, middle class, and extremely intelligent students. So this is a problem for us."<sup>194</sup> When I pressed further, he retracted that such 'diversity' was a problem but still argued that quality education "is standardized by the certificates and marks," "by entrance tests," "by ranks," "English-medium," and "a screening of the students."<sup>195</sup>

When I asked the current principal of Siksha-Sastra about its condition, he said it was just like any other school now and that much of the original uniqueness of it is gone. The only evolution from the days of Tagore and Elmhirst is one towards the mainstream.<sup>196</sup> The principal said that upon completion of class 10 at Siksha-Sastra, most students matriculate into Visva-Bharati's upper secondary school (U.S.S.) and some continue from there into the colleges, like *Vidya Bhavana* (today, College of Sciences) or *Siksha Bhavana* (today, College of Arts). Others return to their villages, but they refuse to engage in any manual work.

They just sit around and read or engage in ‘bad’ habits. In the principal’s words, these children are “*bekar*” (useless).

Most disappointing was the Vice Chancellor of Visva-Bharati, who was unable to articulate at all what Tagore’s ideas were. He thinks Tagore was struggling with “whether or not to create a formal university,” “then got the idea of East-West interaction,” and then thought Visva-Bharati “could be an institution, where many people could come from different parts of the world.” He also thinks that Tagore traveled throughout Asia, Europe, and America “to search for inputs,” and that “Visva Bharati started as an NGO.” Given these confused ideas, it is no wonder that he does not see his “going about the modernization of the university” as running counter to Tagore’s ideas and beliefs. The Vice Chancellor thinks that Tagore’s ideas can be drawn upon if “we tried to introduce a course in computer science, and in that, we roped in a lot of people, like Tagore did when he was collecting rural data. And if we try to know what is happening at the global level.”<sup>197</sup> In his tenure, he has overseen/started a multimedia project, a center on national integration, a rural development project with 42 villages (entrepreneurship training, water, Panchayati Raj Institutions), and courses of study in computer science, environmental studies, journalism, mass communication, and tourism/ travel/heritage management.

To justify his work, the Vice Chancellor claims that critics of Visva-Bharati “don’t understand Tagore. He was a dynamic figure,” and “people are too narrow, think too clandestinely, and do not allow Tagore to have his image cleared. We have a frog-in-the-well attitude coming in the way of any kind of leapfrog. The critics are not aware and don’t think of what Tagore could have been if he had been alive.”<sup>198</sup>

While I agree that Tagore was an evolving, dynamic figure – and that he grew with Santiniketan – I do see some serious conceptual gaps in the way the Vice Chancellor, the principal, the teachers, and the students have articulated Tagore’s ideas. For one, much of what has been said severely contradicts Tagore’s writings. For another, there seems to be an appropriation of Gurudev to suit various agents and agendas as needed.<sup>199</sup> For example, as one interviewee explained, “if [one] tries to introduce any new research or ideas, the authorities say, ‘You are ruining our culture or *parampara*.’ But when the same authorities bring in cars or refrigerators into the *melas*, and if [one] complains, then they say, ‘Gurudev wanted us to bring the East and West together.’”<sup>200</sup> Such conceptual gaps make the possibility of shared vision-building near

impossible, nor do they allow for serious thinking, questioning, or understanding of Tagore for the growth or benefit of Santiniketan as a whole. What both teachers and administrators are doing can be termed a type of 'de-contextualized pedagogy'. They carry out their work with a certain determination, but have not related it to a larger world-view of both challenging the injustices and exploitations of the System and regenerating *Swaraj*.

The above reasons also explain why a re-orientation to Tagore has been so difficult and why even small change attempts have failed in the last 60 years, despite committed leaders like Supriyo Tagore and self-evaluation conferences by Santiniketan authorities.<sup>201</sup> On the demographic side, the university has had to commit itself to serving all the staff's wards, because of pressures from the various unions, making it impossible to re-balance the ratio between day scholars and residential students. The institutionalization process has created a class of people committed to preserving the status quo, while institutional regulations have bogged down many efforts of innovations and spontaneity. The conceptual misunderstandings foster an all-around lack of interest to make a concerted effort for change, and also prevent the accumulation of support for those who do try to make changes.

What can we learn from the breakdown of this experience with systemic and educational transformation is taken up in the third section.

### Section Three: What Can We Learn from Tagore?

Tagore's insights into the human being, systems and learning, as well as the actualization of his ideas in Santiniketan, offer us much food for thought. Tagore has special relevance for what he teaches us about an individual's role in larger struggles for systemic transformation. That is, we can examine the information from the preceding sections on two levels: first, what Tagore's specific ideas mean for struggles of challenge and transformation, and second, what Tagore's life represents more generally, as a demonstration of the personal power of individuals and how they can be actively involved in systemic change processes. Thus, in both content and form, Tagore powerfully and directly challenges those who proclaim the 'end of history'<sup>202</sup> — which, in essence, is equivalent to saying 'this System is the best there is.' Through Tagore, we are offered an entirely different vision of human, social, economic, political, and, of course, lifelong learning relationships. Tagore also confronts and challenges the dominant discourse on education, as propounded by international "Education For All" documents, or India's National Curriculum Framework for School Education and Public Report on Basic Education. His visions and critiques effectively topple the 'sacred' educational pedestal that schools have too long occupied and force all of us to re-think the role of education against the larger contexts of Development, Progress, and Civilization.

Similarly, analyzing Santiniketan — as a living experience in education — has great significance for educationists and those committed to change. It also can be examined from two angles: a) what Santiniketan specifically teaches us about actual efforts to challenge destructive systems, and b) what 'alternative schools' or 'experiments' mean for the larger issue of educational transformation. The 'evolution' of Santiniketan forces those who demand action as the litmus test for true commitment, to consider the critical roles of reflection and vision. It is clear that 'action for action's sake' could never be a true element of the lifelong commitment set forth by Tagore, and it is equally clear that 'alternative schools' have hard lessons to learn from the Santiniketan experience. In addition, Tagore's 'living treasure' brings to mind questions about the natural life spans of institutions in a systemic transformation process. In other words, the accounts of present day Santiniketan force us to ask ourselves if institutions should simply die out when they suffer from near-total inertia and spiritual decay.



What the analyses of both Tagore, the individual, and of Santiniketan, the experience, demonstrate are the linkages among deep, holistic **vision**, committed, consistent **action**, and continuous, constructive **dialogue** — and how all three elements are essential to challenging the System and initiating/achieving transformative change. These elements also bring to the forefront very critical issues of language, leadership, and evolution vs. appropriation. If we are to learn from Tagore and Santiniketan, in ways that inform our understanding and fuel our search for other ways of living, being and learning, then each of these potential obstacles must be considered in detail. The linkages among vision, action, and dialogue also remind us of *Swaraj*. What is clear from all of Tagore's ideas and the experiences at Santiniketan is that efforts to achieve *Swaraj*, at least as defined by Tagore, requires all three elements in great quantity and equal proportion. I therefore will conclude this section by considering what Tagore's *Swaraj* means for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and how these elements of vision, action, and reflection must converge in dynamic and organic ways for re-contextualizing Tagore to today's particular circumstances and struggles.

#### *What Struggles for Transformation Can Learn from Tagore's Ideas*

By drawing upon Tagore's critiques of the (then-British, now-current) educational system, and his own senses of the human being, human systems, and human learning, individuals concerned about transforming education and development can easily uncover a vibrant source of wisdom about individual involvement in processes of systemic change. Though I believe Tagore offers us an infinite depth of knowledge, I have only chosen five pieces to focus on for this aspect of the analysis: the significance of a whole human being and of humanity at large; the redefinition of progress and civilization; the space and appreciation for many different knowledge systems; the freedom to think, to move, and to create; and the ultimate permeation of love in all spheres and processes.

In today's world of factory-schooling and destructive development, the concept of a whole human being is rarely considered. Rather, people are labeled 'human resources,' 'the poor,' 'the marginalized,' 'the disadvantaged'.<sup>203</sup> What nearly all such deficit and compartmentalized descriptors focus on is people's level of economic or material wealth or their potential for such wealth-production, as though this was the most important factor in human life. Abstractions like 'survival of the fittest', 'might is right', and 'basic needs' or strategies for

‘economic growth’, ‘income generation’ and ‘increased production’ germinate from such a mindset, furthering the misconception that material wealth is the primary means to human happiness.<sup>204</sup> Similarly, a faith in larger humanity is completely lacking in the education and development discourse. Nearly always, the emphasis is on more rules, more regulations, more laws, more procedures to get human beings to comply and follow authorities. Such ‘social engineering’ is necessary, because these authorities (school staff, government bureaucrats, police, etc.) ultimately believe that people cannot and should not be trusted to take care of themselves and their communities.

What we learn from Tagore operates on the levels of both the individual and the collective. That is, without a conception of a whole human being, such discussions of ‘human development’ will always remain empty and unbalanced. When we think of the human being as full, we recognize and value the human soul, the human urge to be free and to create, and the individual’s connections to the whole of Humanity and the Web of Life. Today’s ‘Human Development’ discourse unfortunately fails to realize the significance of the Other, often more meaningful, elements of human life and human potential. Tagore himself openly criticized those who thought they could reform this system through poverty alleviation schemes, income generation, or other such tinkering. They forget that a “greater intensive effort to production” only means “a greater exhaustion of materials as well as of humanity;” they do not understand that “only fullness of life makes one happy, not fullness of purse.”<sup>205</sup> In fact, multiplying materials in this parasitic model of production — whether they be of property or monetary — not only fails to address individual fullness, but it also intensifies the inequality between haves and have-nots. It thereby “deals a fatal wound to the social system, through which the whole body [of Humanity] would eventually bleed to death.”<sup>206</sup>

Understanding Tagore also means understanding that one must have faith in human beings. This involves first abandoning urges for ‘social engineering’ or ‘planning’.<sup>207</sup> Human beings must have scope to discover their own inherent goodness, even if such processes take time and great effort. But if one ultimately believes, like Tagore, that humankind must discover many varied paths to *Swaraj*, then one must note the contradiction in adopting extrinsically-driven regulations, laws, procedures to get there. Without an infallible trust in human capacities and human consciences, and an acknowledgement that mistakes will be made because we are human, then all efforts towards systemic change will fall flat.

This discussion leads us to recognizing the important need for redefining progress and civilization. Tagore situated his complete human being in a very different kind of civilization, one that put soul-searching and human creativity ahead of material acquisition and power possession. Progress was similarly redefined: re-discovering the truths of Life was far more meaningful than more buildings or greater wealth. These truths, of course, include the goodness, love, simplicity, creativity, freedom, and connection that are inherent to both individual humans and larger humanity. If we are interested in truly altering the course of destructive development, then we must continuously negotiate and redefine larger visions of progress and civilization. This encompasses rethinking what power, success, and development mean for the future. In reading Tagore today, one finds it eerie how prophetic he was in predicting the downward spiral that humankind would find itself in:

*“Our living society, which should have dance in its steps, music in its voice, beauty in its limbs, which should have its metaphor in stars and flowers, maintaining its harmony with God’s creation, becomes, under the tyranny of prolific greed, like an overladen market-cart jolting and creaking on the road that **leads from things to the Nothing**, tearing ugly ruts across the green life **till it breaks down under the burden of its vulgarity**, on the wayside, **reaching nowhere.**”<sup>208</sup>*

Those of us concerned with the transformation from the Nothing to Something(s) must be willing to engage in processes of negotiation and redefinition — both at an individual level and in the number of communities to which we belong — if we are to reclaim our living society once again. Essential to such movement-processes is viewing power differently. It requires that we abstain from the agenda of grabbing state power (which has led to the demise of many movements) and instead develop notions of fluid and dynamic power, more in tune with the philosophies, values and visions of the Something(s) we hope to create.

This vision-building process requires space and appreciation of several different kinds of knowledge systems, another point that Tagore emphasizes throughout his writings. As described in section one, Tagore saw modern science as being one of many truths (not THE truth) and did not want undue value ascribed to it. Rather, there had to be space for many truths to emerge from and be constructed by various knowledge systems that inhabit the world today. Over-

emphasis on any one vision of the world — such as the scientifically rational, clockwork universe governed by mechanical human beings — destroys the possibility of other, more complex, and often more holistic views of reality. Do we, like Tagore, value the many cultures/*parampara* and environments of the world and see that they make up the collective feast of humanity? If yes, then we realize that it is only from contributing to and partaking in this feast, in all its variety, that humankind will find options out of the current plight of Progress. In other words, knowledge construction and knowledge diversity must be given plenty of space to breathe and grow in any process of transformation.

Nurturing these spaces for the complete human being and the processes of redefinition and knowledge construction relies fundamentally on a concept of freedom. If the purpose of education is to integrate the human personality in ways that allow for individual harmony with all of the world and growth and liberation of the soul, then freedom is essential. It is only through such freedom — freedom to think and question, to move and act, and to create and grow — that one can engage in the processes of deep thinking, committed action, and constant regeneration. Such freedom again collapses the supremacy of socially engineered societies, god-like science, and Economic Man, and paves the way for radical challenging towards greater justice and meaningfulness.

It is important to remember that Tagore never advocated an atomized version of freedom, nor did he subscribe to any ideology of ‘rights’ or ‘duties’. Rather, he felt that freedom grew from within and without; that is, one’s freedom was dependent on both the inner soul and on outer responsibilities to the larger collective. One needed to push the limits of negative freedom — license — in order to acquire the most positive freedom — love. That is, by allowing the individual freedom to search and discover truths, s/he would return to the freedom of love that comes from relationship and responsibility to the whole. Such thinking emerges from a larger faith in humanity and therefore cannot be encapsulated by a framework/discourse of rights and duties.

Love is a continuous theme in Tagore’s thinking. It permeates all the above areas and is crucial for individuals committed to change. Love as a quality, framework, and process has been completely stripped of its value in the modern world. In its place, competition, fear, insecurity, greed, selfishness, and hatred have flourished. Even the current discourse of education and development implicitly subscribes to these negative values and lacks any mention of love. For

example, the most common indicator of development is a country's GNP; yet, to increase the value of the GNP, a country's citizens must engage in great amounts of greed, competition, exploitation, and selfishness. Where has one ever heard that the amount of love felt and displayed in a country, both within individuals and among human beings, as being a real indicator of development? Nor is love ever mentioned in any education curriculum; children are evaluated on how well they do on examinations (where they compete against and put down one another), never by how much love they have cultivated within themselves over a year. But without a framework and process of soulful and spiritual love, neither does human life have much meaning, nor is it possible for human collectives to come together and make constructive changes.

While analyzing Tagore's specific ideas can yield infinite more insights, what we learn from the above wisdom is that one individual can make a tremendous difference in breaking down status quo-oriented attitudes and assumptions. Here is a person, who did nearly everything in his personal power, to challenge the mainstream and create an entirely different reality. He did not accept that 'that's the way the world works', as many of us are apt to do today. Rather, he dared to articulate and live out a different set of economic, political, social and learning relationships. Whether one sings his songs, or witnesses the dramatic performances of his plays, or hears his poetry read aloud, or reads his essays quietly to one's self, one cannot help but understand the depth of impact this single individual had in changing our way of looking at the world. His ideas undermine the dominant discourse of today, and his boldness and consistency in expressing those ideas and working towards them undermine the helpless and hapless attitude of today.

#### *What Struggles for Transformation Can Learn from Santiniketan's Experience*

'Ah, but his experiment failed,' will say the critics to quickly defend themselves. 'This proves that his ideas would not work and that the status quo is the way to go.' It is true that the demise of Santiniketan leaves a sour taste in the mouth, but I do not believe it undermines Tagore's ideas as a whole. Rather, we learn important lessons from Santiniketan, as Tagore did when he was alive, about what constitutes appropriate actions when one is undertaking revolutionary change processes. In its initial phase, Santiniketan informs us that indeed, it is possible, in the face of many obstacles, to set up a challenge to the Systems of Education and of Development. But perhaps, more significantly, Santiniketan also introduces us to the myriad of obstacles that will surface to threaten and dissuade this challenge.

As described in section two, Santiniketan originally embodied the defying spirit of an oasis in a vast desert of colonial models of education, governance, economy, etc. The way in which children and adults related in Brahmacharyasrama, its emphasis on freedom to think, move, and create, and its space for the communion of the soul with Nature, all radically confronted the views propagated by the British (and all over the world). Moreover, by inviting the world to its nest, Santiniketan demonstrated the scope and space for a constructive and healthy interaction amongst the peoples of the world. People did not come for money or material growth; they came to develop their souls, their personalities, their relationship with fellow human beings, in order to leave the world a little better than they found it.<sup>209</sup>

However, with its doors open to the world, the bad came in with the good. In Tagore's day, outside pressure to present formal degrees and take examinations, teachers' inability to understand the foundational principles of Santiniketan, and the mainstream educational System as a whole, all undermined the challenge Tagore was trying to make. Yet, he himself recognized this perversion, and, as quoted in the earlier section, was willing to abandon the entire effort if it continued in that direction. Such critical self-reflection and the willingness to 'call the spade a spade' are two dimensions that are severely lacking in nearly all actions occurring in the name of change, particularly in the international development and voluntary sectors. To admit to oneself that one's work is now producing more harm than good, and to be open to either rethinking its foundational principles or to dropping it completely, takes tremendous courage.

Unfortunately, it appears both these elements are lacking in today's Santiniketan. Or to be more fair, while many of the current and former teachers, students and administrators acknowledge the chasm between Santiniketan's present manifestation and Tagore's original intentions, overcoming its demographic shifts, institutional co-optation and conceptual gaps seems to be near impossible. Indeed, unless one has built-in spaces for continuous reflection and dialogue into the very structure of their actions, such severe obstacles will inevitably overwhelm any serious challenge to the System. Santiniketan specifically 'educates' us (pun intended) to realize the need for open spaces of self- and group-reflection at all levels of a learning organization. If such spaces are totally lacking and cannot be grown in the necessary capacity — if the weight of the institution produces total inertia and

its spirit has totally decayed — then perhaps it is time to re-affirm Tagore's courage, allow Santiniketan to come to an end, and re-name the institution "Bolpur University."<sup>210</sup>

More generally, we learn through Santiniketan's experience to question the craze to set up 'alternative schools' and 'educational models'. Just as Tagore never intended Santiniketan to be a school, he also never intended it to be a model, in the sense that it was the 'right' answer and it should be replicated. Rather, he saw Santiniketan as one of infinite numbers of learning spaces, which would grow organically from the soil of unique cultures and environments to develop the souls of and connections between their human inhabitants. In other words, while we can learn from Tagore's principles, we must also remember that a replica of Santiniketan would never be appropriate elsewhere. In fact, a copy of Santiniketan would fundamentally nullify its very purpose.

We also learn that, without making clear and conscious challenges to the current larger political, economic, and social System, 'alternative schools' can either be totally co-opted, or they can be pushed so far to the margins that they are irrelevant. Santiniketan today is living out the former fate. But had it attempted to isolate itself, just to 'preserve Tagore', it would have exemplified the latter. Tagore himself recognized how a radical experiment in education could not separate itself from the larger environment, for "good education of children is not possible unless good ideals govern the society."<sup>211</sup> Without aspirations towards such ideals in society, then no matter what is taught in the formal system of education — and no matter how it is taught — it will not be able to counter the effects that perverse or inhumane societal values have on the child. Even the most 'alternative' of educationists would remain downright helpless in an age where "collective greed is glorified as patriotism and inhuman butchery is the measure of heroism."<sup>212</sup> Conversely, 'alternative schools' will have little impact in the long-run, if they fail to continuously and critically question the measures, processes, and goals of the larger economic, political, and social System.

### *Understanding Obstacles (as Opportunities) in Struggles for Transformation*

If Santiniketan is to rejuvenate itself into being the radical challenge it once was, and if Tagore is to assume his rightful place in our collective consciousness as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then ultimately we must comprehend the triangular linkages among reflection, dialogue, and action. By taking a few obstacle areas into consideration — namely, language, leadership, and evolution

vs. appropriation — I will demonstrate how sound linkages among these three elements is essential to any effort at transforming education within a complete vision of development. Tagore himself struggled in these areas, and Santiniketan continues to struggle with them today. I imagine that all thinker-practitioners in education and development would find insights in these areas useful, as they go forward in their own struggles with dynamic change.

First, the issue of language poses many problems for those attempting to undertake a radical challenge. In so many ways, we are trapped by the language we use: on the one hand, it helps to shape our understanding of the world; on the other hand, it can severely constrict this understanding when we get caught in its limitations. In examining Tagore, for example, one finds some very obvious contradictions in his use of language. Based upon his immense dislike for and critique of schools, one can safely presume that Tagore never wanted Brahmacharyasrama or Patha Bhavana, or any part of Santiniketan, to even remotely resemble a school. Yet, he repeatedly uses the term ‘school’ in his English writings to describe these learning spaces.<sup>213</sup> Similarly, he notes the complexity of the East and the West, discerning that neither is monolithic, that material and spiritual tendencies exist in both, that they learn from one another, and that what is at stake (and thus what is most important) is our larger Humanity. Yet again, we often find the terms ‘East’ and ‘West’ used in a seemingly essentialized manner in his English writings.<sup>214</sup>

Despite his astounding writing abilities, I believe that Tagore employed this seemingly contradictory language for two reasons. For one, I think he wanted to relate to people, particularly English audiences, in terms they could understand. He never used such terms in his native Bengali.<sup>215</sup> By using these terms, he was more accessible to English speakers, which would enable them to make sense of his real mission: to re-define the terms. Rather than completely throw them out of the language and invent new words, Tagore tried to introduce new meaning to the terms ‘school,’ ‘East’ and ‘West’, and tried to give new vibrancy to tired and deficit-laden vocabulary. He also saw the limitations of replacing ‘school’ with *ashram* or *tapovan*, or ‘West’ and ‘East’ with Europe and India. In the first case, people would have disregarded Tagore’s ideas in education, saying that he was living in the ancient past and not considering the realities of the modern world. In the second case, Tagore would not have been able to get at the idea of a Systemic world-view, which surpasses any nation’s boundaries. Moreover, as he was against the idea of a Nation, I do not think he would have wanted to set up an opposition on the lines of the Nation-State. Whatever the reason, it is



clear that Tagore was constantly reflecting on, redefining, and re-articulating these terms. They were up for continuous debate and discussion, and the evolution of his thinking on these terms is evident in the variety and history of his writings.

An analysis of Santiniketan brings to mind another potential obstacle: leadership. Inspired and supported by the input and actions of many individuals, Tagore's vision of what and how Santiniketan was to be grew with the learning space. Yet many claim that when he died, a crisis in leadership ensued.<sup>216</sup> While people like Nandalal Bose in Kala Bhavan took up the immediate responsibility of carrying forward Tagore's vision, it does not seem that any of the remaining teachers, students or administrators were able to take charge of the process of re-contextualizing it for the changing times.<sup>217</sup> When the central government came to shoulder the financial responsibility for Santiniketan, it appears to have furthered this crisis in leadership, perhaps ultimately resulting in the tremendous conceptual gaps, operational breakdown and institutional inertia we see today.

The lack of courageous leadership in Santiniketan — or the suppression of efforts at such leadership — again reminds us of the significance of reflection, dialogue, and action. In Santiniketan today, action is readily visible, with an administration bent on building more, a teaching staff bent on completing their syllabus, and a student body bent on obtaining their degrees. In the midst of all of these 'followers', what is missing are collective vision-building, leadership-building and leadership-exercising processes based on continuous dialogue and reflection. If Santiniketan is to live up to the distinction of being 'Tagore's place', and not 'just any other university,' then as in Tagore's day, freedom must be readily available in order to evolve such processes. In turn, freedom requires a feedback structure to actualize the outcomes of these processes. In other words, as student, teacher, and administrative leaders try to engage in reflection and dialogue on the foundational premises of Santiniketan, they must simultaneously uncover spaces for transferring their ideas into practice. In fact, if such leadership emerges, it would mean shifting power from the hands of a central authority back into the organic learning spaces of Santiniketan.<sup>218</sup>

However, freedom and leadership without dialogue and reflection can easily burgeon into the third obstacle area: evolution vs. appropriation/preservation. I realize that all attempts at understanding great thinker-doers, like Tagore, involves some degree of interpretation, for no one knows the absolute truth

about or holds absolute claim over Tagore. After all, even in this analysis, I have made choices about how to present Tagore as I see him: as a radical ‘freedom fighter’ in the true sense of the word. But in section two, I described how Tagore appears to have been appropriated to suit different authorities’ needs in ways that unfortunately run directly counter to his entire framework. It is from these examples that the dilemma of evolution vs. appropriation/preservation emerges. The challenge for those committed to transformation is how to encourage re-contextualization and an evolution of ideas — as great thinker-doers like Tagore would have wanted to happen — without succumbing to unbalanced or inaccurate appropriation or fossilized preservation.

Here, again, the opportunities and spaces for reflection and dialogue are key. Is there space to question and discuss what new research on learning and development mean for Tagore’s ideas and for Santiniketan? Unfortunately, the overwhelming answer from interviewees was no.<sup>219</sup> Is there space to question and discuss the growth of tourism or the degeneration of festivals and their impact on the spirit of Santiniketan? Unfortunately, again, the answer was no.<sup>220</sup> Without open forums to come to a consensus on what Tagore believed and what he intended Santiniketan to be, it is clear that inaccurate appropriation will be rampant and the scope for deep thinking on re-contextualization/evolution of Tagore will be thwarted. Tagore’s name will be attached to the university for funding or will be used to justify repetitive and empty ‘rituals,’ but the actual experience of his ideas will be missed out by all.

In the larger context, this dynamic between evolution and appropriation/preservation is lived out on a daily basis. How often do we take the words or ideas of other great thinker-doers, like Mahatma Gandhi, and hold them static, despite the deep significance of our changing times? How often are innovative experiments or vital, diverse ways of living and being co-opted or appropriated and, in the process, wiped out of existence? This tension — between re-contextualizing concepts and values to meet the realities, needs and aspirations of today vs. succumbing to the tendency to essentialize ideas or people and then co-opt/appropriate them as desired — can only be negotiated by building in and reinforcing spaces for contestation, questioning, dialogue, and reflection. While institutional pressures for standardization threaten such spaces, we cannot afford to ignore that they are at the heart of Tagore’s own vision of learning and *Swaraj*.

Thus, in the end, the linkages among reflection, action, and dialogue bring us back to Tagore's conception of *Swaraj*. For Tagore, *Swaraj* could never be static. In his view, no one should ever assume such a position of leadership so powerful that it eliminates the possibility of creating organic, dynamic new visions from diverse cultures, environments, and knowledge systems. No experience or language should ever be institutionalized to such a degree that it eliminates the possibility of active reflection, consistent dialogue, and deep learning. Organic creativity, experimentation, and continuous lifelong learning, where each individual and collective is thinking openly and freely about their relationship to Self, to Humankind, and to Nature, thus lie at the heart of Tagore's *Swaraj*. Perhaps it is this lesson that we could most stand to learn as we approach, anticipate and work towards radical transformation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### Section Four: The Road Ahead

I conclude by offering some questions for further discussing, understanding, and applying the preceding three sections:

- ❑ How can members of a community nurture the freedom of thinking, movement, and creation today necessary to regenerate various spaces of learning?
- ❑ In what ways can Tagore's ideas re-enter the education discourse to challenge the dominant Education system at local, national, and international levels?
- ❑ In what ways can Tagore's ideas enter the Development discourse to challenge the whole System and contribute to processes of redefining progress and civilization?
- ❑ How would you utilize Tagore's ideas and experiences to better understand and create your own vision of the Self, the Family, the Community, the Society, and the World?

I invite and encourage ideas and responses to the preceding analysis and to the above questions. It is my hope that such critical and constructive feedback will result in both ideas for organic application of this research and in suggestions for further research.

The comments that follow have been gathered as a first stage in this process. The contributors were given the first three sections of this paper and were invited to share their own understandings in order to promote a broader dialogue on Tagore's ideas, Santiniketan's experiences, and the analysis of both. Their essays/comments have been reprinted as received (when necessary, they have been slightly modified to remove personal remarks). Although I do not agree with some of the ideas presented and feel that they warrant further discussion, I do not want to stifle expression or dialogue by responding to them in this publication. Rather, I hope that by sharing a diversity of opinions and ideas, it will prompt more in-depth exchange and reflection between me and the authors, between the authors themselves, and among a wider range of readers.

Contributions appear in the following order: Supriyo Tagore, Vasant Palshikar, Anand Dwivedi, Bratin Chattopadhyay, Sabu KC, R. S. Khanna, Selena George, Nand Chaturvedi, Vivek Maru, Munir Fasheh, Vivek Bhandari, Vachel Miller, Ron Burnett, Cole Genge, Fred Mednick, Christina Rawley, Steve Compton, Alberto Arenas, and Jock McClellan.

I thank these friends and invite others to continue and expand this dialogue.

## The Poet's School

Patha Bhavana is the name of the school at Santiniketan under the University of the Visva Bharati.

But Patha Bhavana is not just another school among thousand others. It was founded by one of the greatest minds of our nation — Rabindranath.

In December 1901, the Poet started the school with five students under the name of '*Brahmacharya Vidyalay*'. Very soon it grew into a fairly large residential school and the name Patha Bhavana replaced its earlier name. The school, during the lifetime of the Poet attracted students from different parts of the country and became widely known as an institution of creative experiment in child's learning. It started as a school for boys but became co-educational within a short period.

To put it very briefly – Rabindranath believed in helping children realize the great potential human beings are born with. With the help of various stimuli – students were encouraged to bring into light their inner strength – physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Freedom of man was the basic assumption and an interaction of man and nature; man and man; and man and a higher truth were considered the highest value. Individual differences were not only respected, but were actually nurtured. At the same time selfishness was condemned. Under the conditions competition was totally discouraged; punishment and stifling had no place in the system; stereotyped examinations were discarded.

But at present this is history. The demon of examination has taken its toll and many important ideas of individual development had to be curtailed. We have not been able to save our children from the evils of competition, and they are very much in the middle of the rat-race. Consequently, the essential spirit of the institution has changed.

But again, everything is not lost. The surroundings of the school are still very beautiful – and nature's gift may be received abundantly, and this perhaps has a soothing effect on the nerve-shattering experience of acute competition.

One can still be proud of the excellent human relationship that exists in the school. Many teachers still have a friendly and cordial relationship with the taught. That makes life bearable.

The drudgery of preparing for stereotyped examination can be made bearable through participation in various cultural and creative activities, which fortunately have not been discarded. A child still has freedom to sing or paint or write poems. The weekly literary meetings are still full of creative writings and recitations and songs and dances.

Our children still go to nearby villages to gain first hand experience of rural life and its problems. They themselves contribute and collect contributions to lend a helping hand to many children in distress.

The body finds expression through games and sports. Children also participate in the programmes of cleaning the premises, helping in the garden or even building an experimental mud-house. Various crafts are a part of the time-table where they do woodwork, metal-work, clay-modeling, weaving etc.

A strong and meaningful students' self-government, called *Ashram Sanmilani*, permits the pupils to share effectively in the day-to-day running of the school. Even an erring student is answerable to a students' court of law (*Bichar Sabha*).

The school starts with a prayer which is essentially nondenominational. Every evening the residential students sit under the stars in a silent nonformal meditation and at the end of it chant the Vedic mantra — 'We bow to the God who pervades fire, water, trees and creepers and the whole universe.' There is a weekly congregation on a Wednesday, the weekly holiday, at the Mandir where Rabindranath's songs are sung and a passage from his writings is read out.

These are the areas where children get a free scope to express themselves. But the academics are a different matter altogether. The final examination is so very powerful that it dictates terms. The examination is just as stereotyped as in the rest of the country. Of course good teachers try to find some way out of the closely-woven question-answer model of class teaching to impart ideas concerning life, but it is a difficult task.

Everyday the school administration is losing faith in old values of the school. A constant tug-of-war goes on in the school between the demands of the examinations and a healthy living for culture or value. Some teachers are fighting a losing battle for a meaningful education — Rabindranath's ideals — and they have not given-up the fight.

Time has come to make a definite choice—a choice between life-centered education and an anti-life education, between value-oriented education and so-called success-oriented education. Or is there any choice at all?

**— Supriyo Tagore**  
*Former Principal of Patha Bhavana*  
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I read this paper with great interest as Tagore is one of my passions.

I fully agree with you that Tagore is formally praised and held high because he fetched a Nobel Prize for India. Otherwise, he is neither read, nor understood. Moreover, he is not seen wholistically, at the most, as a 'Poet'.

For those of us who are convinced that following the path to development, progress, wealth, and pleasure followed by the Modern West is ruinous for not only India but for the whole of humankind, Tagore is of great significance, both for what he was in his own person and what he created in terms of ideas, thoughts, and the experiments in the regeneration of people he initiated.

Hence your exploratory essay is most welcome. It might be a good idea to get together about 10-12 people who are equally interested in Tagore for a dialogic interaction: not an intellectual seminar of academics with all kinds of presentations and very little dialogue. Such a dialogue is needed to fill out the portrait of Tagore as a person in his completeness. In this matter, Dutta and Robinson's biography also does not fully satisfy me, though it is of great help.

I felt that your essay should have begun with your portrayal of Tagore as a person through the crucial early stages of his life to his late-middle age until when he retained the vigor to sustain the experiment, both spiritually guiding it and raising finances for it.

Tagore came from one of the most culturally sophisticated and up-to-date enlightened families then existing in India and with a surfeit of talents in all fields. He was also a product of a large metropolitan city of the rising bourgeois world – a commercial city par excellence and also the seat of the GOI. All this sophistication, the luxuries, the urbane atmosphere around him seems to have stifled him and he came to feel that he was caged in. It is very strange that Tagore was never confident of his command over English language nor was he comfortable about using it. I get a feeling that he felt English was not the language that could express fully what he wished to say.

Realizing that he needed to escape out of the city, his father, possibly, sent him to look after one of their estates. There in communion with Nature, Tagore found fullness and peace and his creativity blossomed forth. He believed in *atman* and *paramatman* of the Upanishads, and it was moving through the Estate, living by and on the river (Padma?) and seeing and listening to Nature closely that he felt one with the Greater.

I also have the feeling that it was living amongst the common poor, famished folk on and around the Estate that his compassion for them was aroused. And he came to feel one with them as they also could communicate with him through their inner soul, although in all other respects their condition (background, learning, wealth, etc.) was at opposite poles. This identification with them was through language, literature, music, festivals, dance, and such aspects of culture, which, for Tagore, was far more richer than the anglicised culture of the emerging Bengali Bhadrloka. Irrespective of their poverty, 'ignorance', exploitation by others, sufferings, the people were spiritually at a higher level of living, as Tagore experienced in their company.

This made it easy for him to see into the heart of modern Western Nationalism, the modern centralized State, and what passed as high living and high culture amongst the urban elite. As early as 1906, he broke away from the agitation against the partition of Bengal, which angered the Bhadrloka to no end.

At the same time, he was a product of the Renaissance and Enlightenment and hence he was free of parochialism, was for Reason, and welcomed Science and Technology. But all this integrated with his spiritual view of life.

He was a most heart-broken man too. There was the unsatisfactory relationship with his wife, the death of dear ones, the suicide of the sister-in-law he deeply loved, and other shocks. The yearning for communion with the Creator could have been an outcome of these various shocks and setbacks. He could be wholly himself and creative in an *ashrama* or a *tapovana* wherein he was the *Rishi* surrounded with *shishyas* gathered.



The award of a Nobel Prize made him a world famous celebrity, who attracted to himself men and women who were also dissatisfied with the dominant materialist civilizations and culture. The 1<sup>st</sup> World War also may have brought home to him the urgent need to build an International institution to foster universal brotherhood. The founding of Visva-Bharati changed the scale of things. Now a world-famous figure the Bhadralka began to flock around him. Initially all this must have seemed 'a dream come true' but financially the burden grew to an extent Tagore found hard to carry. He was forced to go on lecture tours abroad to raise money, which also meant he was away from Santiniketan for long periods. A place of learning and creation that he had in mind required his presence much more. The influx of elite children from Calcutta and elsewhere also must have created subtle pressures to make Santiniketan send children for Calcutta University exams and such.

A place like Santiniketan could have sustained Tagore's dream only if (i) it did not link up with an education system; (ii) the *shishyas* gathered there had not come with aspirations for worldly careers requiring certificates, and the number was small; (iii) the expenses were met through the largesse of moneyed men or kings/zamindars/capitalists or the inmates produced enough from the land, rivers, forests, to meet their requirements; and (iv) the community had lived simply, almost in voluntary poverty.

From Gandhi's experience of Santiniketan even in 1914-1915, it looks as if Tagore disregarded the urgent need to make Santiniketan self-sufficient by producing enough from land and crafts and village industries. Neither did he give enough importance to living simply: there were servants there, which mean, already the Bhadralka aristocratic elite influx had begun. In this crucial matter, Tagore had his weaknesses.

Secondly, places like Santiniketan would not be able to meet the needs of a large urban and complex society. In many fields, a long, rigorous training necessitating hard work and giving up 'freedom' to do or not to do is essential. Say, farming, weaving and many more such occupations which are needed to sustain a society. Take music, for instance, or dancing. Even educating in the traditional way requires years of rigorous hard work with voluntarily accepted discipline, which can be felt as 'binding' and constraining from doing many things one would like to do.

In this sense, Tagore was blind to the many mundane requirements of any large society. In this way, his vision was a flawed vision. This is showed up in his impassioned controversy with Gandhi on the Charkha. If he had logically, realistically followed up his ideas outlined in Swadeshi Samaj, he would have supported Gandhi fully in his programme of Charkha and other village industries. Gandhi was also open to technological improvements but with strong conditions. A pure product of Santiniketan would be a cultured, spiritual free creative person who would have to be clothed, housed, fed, and taken care of by others, and these others could not have been sent to a place like Santiniketan!

Your comments on 'alternative' schools or educational projects around the country are rather uncharitable. Those who are actually engaged in such work (which is very varied), many of them would not understand what makes you make those comments. From my little contact with this 'world', I see that each one of them is distinctive, and is very much in touch with ground reality and hence quite aware and self-searching. They may like to ask you: of whom are you talking?

Let me repeat; I enjoyed reading your essay and quite stimulating instructive.

— Vasant Palshikar  
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## The Infinite World Within

Reading this analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's innovations in education was a rewarding experience; it brought back my memories of Shantiniketan. While I was at Shantiniketan in the mid-eighties, I had a chance to meet some individuals who had worked with Tagore; they all described the loss of quality Shantiniketan had suffered over the decades. The history of great institutions like Shantiniketan raises several questions: Why do these institutions degenerate? What can we learn from them? Can we recreate another Shantiniketan if we try to put Tagore's ideas into practice? Where do great ideas come from? Is it possible to put somebody else's ideas into practice?

It seems to me that ideas cannot be inherited, borrowed, or followed. If we want great ideas we need to explore ourselves; others' ideas are only useful if they help us in this self-exploration. All great ideas seem to spring from a state of mind where our ordinary consciousness comes in contact with a larger, deeper consciousness. Tagore describes one such experience of this contact in these words:

*"As I continued to gaze, all of a sudden a covering seemed to fall away from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side. This radiance pierced in a moment through the folds of sadness and despondency which had accumulated over my heart, and flooded it with this universal light."*

(My Reminiscences, p.217)

As a result of this experience, Tagore says, he could see the world as it really is:

*"Now that the self was put into the background, I could see the world in its own true aspect."*

(My Reminiscences, p.216)

This is an experience where the ordinary consciousness (self) was put into the background, and Tagore could see through the 'universal light'.

It is these personal experiences that seem to give birth to great ideas. Call them spiritual experiences, God-experiences, union with the universal mind, or whole-brain experiences, without them we cannot access great ideas. Of course we can accumulate words of great persons but their meaning will come from our ordinary selves. Therefore, a true dialogue on Rabindranath Tagore should inspire us to explore our own selves so that we may be able to put our self (our rationality) into the background and come in contact with our universal self. Then and then only we will be able to look at the world as it really is. This vision will then unfold into appropriate ideas and actions.

Shilpa's study on Tagore refers again and again to this inner harmony which deepens the relationship of the individual with the whole. For Tagore, the realization of this deep relationship was the aim of learning. To quote Shilpa: "He [Tagore] saw four main goals in the purpose of learning: a) achieving unity with truth, b) integrating oneself into harmony with all existence, c) acquiring fullness in personality, and d) freeing the soul. ... Ultimately, learning must enable one to achieve the 'highest purpose of man: the fullest growth and freedom of soul'."

Now the question is, what is the meaning of 'unity with truth' or 'harmony with all existence' or 'fullness in personality' or 'freedom of soul'? These words have their dictionary meanings but the dictionary meanings are just other words. Real meanings come from our own personal experiences - those experiences where the ordinary consciousness was 'put into the background'. It seems that one learns best only when the 'self' (the normal consciousness) is put into the background and the subconscious is allowed to unfold. As Shilpa says: "He [Tagore] was convinced that children's subconscious mind was more active than their conscious intelligence and that children had learned joyfully through their subconscious mind for generations, for it was completely integrated into the ebbs, flows, and energy of life."

There seems to be something infinite within us which our ordinary consciousness cannot touch and without which our thinking, doing, and being is bound to be caught in ignorance. However, when we are in contact with this infinite, whatever we do becomes creative, joyous, fulfilling. To quote Shilpa again, Tagore confirmed the possibility that practical or constructive work could be creative, "If through doing it, human beings were giving expression to their own deeper consciousness of the infinite within."

It seems to me that we cannot even begin to understand Tagore unless we invest his words with our personal experience of the infinite within.

It seems that when Tagore talks of freedom, he is referring to freedom from the ordinary consciousness into the infinite within; Shilpa seems to mean the same by 'liberation of the soul' when she says: "If the purpose of education is to integrate the human personality in ways that allows for individual harmony with all of the world and growth and liberation of the soul, then freedom is essential."

Discussing Tagore's concept of freedom, Shilpa says: "For Tagore, perfect freedom for the soul actually stems from the perfect harmony of a relationship realized in the natural world - not through our standard, 'scientific' response to *knowing it*, but instead through our intimate, soulful connection to *being with it*."

Contact with the infinite within leads to a deeper relationship with the outside world, as Shilpa suggests: "The ultimate end of freedom and creation for Tagore is 'to know that I am', *to know that we are*, and to redirect human consciousness from the separateness of the self into unity with all. The true perfection of freedom, therefore, finds its intensity in love."

Since our ordinary consciousness (our logical, rational mind) lives and sees things in separateness, it can never comprehend the 'unity with all'. Once our self learns to merge with the infinite within, we have a harmonious relationship with the outside world. Once we have this harmonious relationship, the world becomes our playmate, as Tagore seems to suggest in his poem "On the Seashore":

*"The sea surges up with laughter, and pale gleams the smile of the sea-beach. Death-dealing waves sing meaningless ballads to the children, even like a mother while rocking her baby's cradle. The sea plays with children, and pale gleams the smile of the sea-beach.*  
*On the sea-shore of endless worlds children meet. Tempest roams in the pathless sky, ships are wrecked in the trackless water, death is abroad and children play. On the seashore of endless worlds is the great meeting of children."*

On the shoreline connecting the inner world of mind with the external world of sense-perception lives the human being. How we look at the world and how we live our lives depends on who we are. The world is like a sea. If we are 'pearl-fishers' or 'merchants' sailing in it, then the sea means death and danger to us; but if we know the sea as our playmate, then the sea becomes a loving mother, laughing, singing, playing.

If we treat it as mere philosophy, as a logically accepted approach to life, then Tagore is of little or no value to us. However, if we see it as an attempt on Tagore's part to express in words a personal experience of the infinite, then Tagore's words should inspire us to go beyond our rational-logical-verbal understanding (our ordinary consciousness or self) into our universal consciousness.

I feel that a great institution like Shantiniketan begins to degenerate when the living experience of its originator is turned into dead philosophy by his followers. An experience cannot be followed; it can only be felt. And what we feel is our own. Words of great persons like Tagore can be of immense value only when we use them as news of the infinite and are inspired to move towards the source. A true dialogue on Tagore, therefore, should enable us to share our own experiences of the infinite; through such sharings we may arrive at deeper vision of life and the world. Then in the light of this vision we can look at the world with its beauty and problems. From this meaningful actions can emerge to address the needs of our time.

On the other hand, if we do not begin with the experiences of the infinite and rely only on our intellectual inquiry, then our vision is always going to be confused and our actions (however well-meaning) can only add to the problems of the world. As Tagore says:

*"Knowledge is partial, because our intellect is an instrument; it is only a part of us... Intellect sets us apart from the things to be known... Therefore, as the Upanishads say, mind can never know Brahma, words can never describe him; he can only be known by our soul, by her joy in him, by her love. Or in other words, we can only come into relation with him by union - union of our whole being."*

(Lectures and Addresses, p.156-57).

'Union of our whole being' is probably union of the entire mind, where our conscious mind is connected with the rest of the mind.

In the light of how I understand Tagore, I have a few suggestions. These suggestions also address the questions which Shilpa has offered at the end of her study:

1. I feel that people should engage themselves in dialogue. The purpose of these dialogues should be to self-exploration.
2. These dialogues should lead to ways of putting the 'self' into the background and gaining access to the entire mind (the infinite within, the universal self, the Brahman).
3. People should exchange their personal experiences of the infinite as well as how these experiences transformed their understanding of and relationship with the world.
4. Now the problems of the world should be thoroughly analyzed; from such analysis coordinated actions should emerge to address these problems at various levels.

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**My Response and the Disagreements:**  
**On Sharks and the Icebergs**

Philosophizing as an academic exercise, ever lost its need and worth. Education or say, Politics for that matter, as an second order philosophical idea had been more concerned with the epistemological debate, especially during the pre- First World War days, is rather interesting and important in the present post- Second World War days.<sup>1</sup> The later day people in the business of education are more concerned with the process than the product. There is a trend of understanding such ideas through the axiomatic theorization of the capacities of the educational ideas that has been idealised in the back drop of the pre- and post- First World War spectre. The world was nonetheless similar as it is today and the aspiration for an idealised society was nonetheless more relevant those days, but here is a society in continuum with the past and that has to be realised, through, education in this case.

The practice of such ideas through time at least fell prey of two unforeseen troubles. If the first was the problem with the 'sharks', the other was the problem with 'submerged icebergs'! Post- First World War educational endeavours sailing through in realizing the world, idealised fell prey of inept understanding of the philosophical nuances of the idea, or the lack of skill to interpret the nuances. And the sharks took its toll. On the other hand, the inherent incompetence of the educational idea, that worked as template failed to achieve for there was a submerged island within.

In this post- Cold War days school education is respected more as a developmental imperative; the question of quality got saturated with the quantity. School education, even the concept of a 'school' is fast changing its connotation. Education in this world is more than an imperative of an individual, it is a compulsion with the nation State, an idea that have matured in the post- First World War days.

Rabindranath, a pre- First World War educator has been distinct in his approach. Challenging, primarily the very premise of school education, that is a product of Industrialisation has been critical in liberating human spirit of freedom and ever had accepted mechanisation of industry in education. A pioneer in education, he could explain the contradictions between the mechanistic logic of cause and effect in opposition to human possibility and creativity. Educational philosophy-wise, Rabindranath, today in this post- Cold War day, is contemporary for his idealization of individual man and his/her education.

Briefly, this sets the agenda of Rabindranath's educational idea, but here is a man who intended to actualize his realizations. What makes him distinct, even at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century when education of a child is a State compulsion and rather gets idealised through committee meetings and commission reports. And, here is a document, interpreting, analysing the educational ideas of Tagore.

Any idea as a theoretical premise has to have its own specific domain, as a practice it of course assumes a different domain. Approach-wise, this document tends to build up a premise, and interpret and analyse accordingly. The premise proposed quoting from various sources presents, Rabindranath's educational idea and the man as a 'Revolutionary'. This is critical. Revolution as a term, distinguishes the past from the present. This would not require any mass of quotation that Rabindranath was deeply seated in the tradition. Never had he separated the past from the present; as a matter of fact, he was to see the past as a continuum with the present through a process of evolution. Ideally, this distinguishes Rabindranath from others, this makes Rabindranath more interesting and relevant at the end of Industrial Revolution and Cold War.

Governed by the first premise of the approach, the document has sailed through quoting and not quoting from the first hand experience gathered during the researchers stay in Santiniketan. There were traps, there were sharks and icebergs and the toll is evident. The document has failed to understand and analyse the *process of evolution* that was essential.

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**Rabindranath Tagore's Challenges to Schooling:**  
**Some Reflections for Further Research**

It appears that education today is being narrowly defined and perceived as a process of schooling. The current model of schooling is not able to develop the personality of the child (or those who receive it) holistically. In fact a major outcome of contemporary schooling is the production of large number of individuals with 'successes/ 'pass' and 'failures' based on inadequate estimations of limited dimensions of individuals' capabilities. Such a process leads to treat human beings as commodities rather than individual personalities. This kind of large-scale 'factory' model of 'schooling' is associated with certain characteristic features including an emphasis on competition, often unhealthy, rather than on collaboration or co-operation.

For more than 50 years after the colonial days, India has struggled with the factory model of schooling in its effort to obtain the right kind of citizens for the kind of democratic state that India wants to be, by emphasising on education through schooling. But today we are alarmed with the 'kind of qualities' reflected by the generations that were subjected to the 'factory model of schooling'. The degradation of moral values among the 'educated', the corruption in the 'educated' bureaucracy etc. is glaring realities in contemporary India. In spite of all these, in order to prepare for the take off in to the 21st century, efforts are being accelerated by the Government to ensure that all it's children are 'schooled'. At this juncture it is perhaps the right time for us to ask the fundamental question of what is wrong with our education? It is time for us to re-think our Education through Schooling.

Ms. Shilpa Jain's research paper comes in at a time when the relevance of the current model of schooling is being challenged by those who have serious concerns about Education in India as well as in other countries. This paper tries to examine the relevance of Tagore's ideas on Education particularly in the context of the institutions initiated by Tagore. Drawing upon the analyses of the published works of Tagore, interviews and observations with the staff members, students and alumni of the institutions of Tagore, Shilpa Jain describes the process of the gradual disappearance of the original ideas of Tagore from his own institutions. Further, the lessons to be learned from the Tagore's experience are also highlighted.

This paper is part of a series of analyses, initiated by SHIKSHANTHAR, of the ideas of the Indian visionaries including Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo and Krishnamurthi. In the Indian context, this paper is likely to have a stimulating effect on the thought process of those who are interested in education and learning. The contents of the paper can be catalytic in the process of the serious endeavours undertaken by the citizens, civil society and the development organisation including the donors to address the core issues related to Education in India. Given below are some of the reflections of this writer based on the paper of Shilpa Jain.

*Some Questions for Further Research*

Why should the Tagorean Ideas grow in the Institutions initiated by Tagore alone? It may or may not flourish there. But certainly it may flourish somewhere else as well. Therefore why not explore the spread of Tagorean Ideas in other institutions as well?

Did the research begin with an assumption that Tagore's institution should promote Tagore's ideas? Perhaps it is not necessary that ideas get accepted in the immediate circles of the individuals who generated them. It is a known fact that the Marxian ideas flourished in foreign settings including parts of India rather than the home country of Karl Marx. Communism flourished, in India, in locations other than those of its original landing places. For example, it grew and spread much faster in Kerala rather than in Andhra Pradesh. The ideas of Buddha have spread and established in foreign countries than the source of its origin.

Therefore in order to know the relevance of 'Tagorism', one has to go beyond the institutions initiated by Tagore. In fact a real indicator of Tagore's relevance/irrelevance lies perhaps at far and wide places rather than within Shantiniketan and the other institutions/centres initiated by Tagore.

*Relevance of Tagorean Thoughts for Different Users*

Tagore's ideas, philosophy and creative work are appreciated in different circles/sections of the society. Manifestations of the creative ideas of Tagore may be reflected in the areas of Theatre, Education/ Pedagogy, Philosophy, Literature, Theology, Social Work, Public Administration, Law etc. It may be of interest to know how

different users like learners, practitioner, and others including the close associates and immediate circles of Tagore are working on the ideas of Tagore. Similarly the experiences of the organisations/ Institutions bearing Tagore's name may also be source for exploring the relevance of Tagore's ideas through further research.

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### Tagore's Schooling System - Some Comments

In understanding Tagore's philosophy, one has to understand his family background and its traditions. Tagore's family had a strong tradition of personal liberty, personal decision and enterprise. It is this which led him to rebel against rules, against schools and against accepted social norms. Tagore did not have a school education in the formal sense of attending school classes. He had the education at his family home under tutors who imparted him education. He rebelled against the school atmosphere. His philosophy of education is based upon the general philosophy which gave primacy to freedom of thought, freedom of movement, creativity and freedom from school curriculum. He was against 'State nationalism' but in favour of 'nationalism'.

I do not understand the difference between nationalism and State nationalism. Nationalism based upon common religion has resulted in different States becoming separate nations. He is against competition but is in favour of love and affection in human advancement. I am against his protest against competition. Competition does not mean cutting each other's throat. So long as competition implies competing for progress without pulling down some one's leg and amongst States without following beggar my neighbour policy, it should be welcomed.

Tagore started his school in the open atmosphere where children could move freely. He must have decided what to teach at various stages whether the subjects were language, mathematics, music or dance or science subjects. There must have been some sort of syllabus in his mind. After all in his school students did move from one class to another and later on from school to college. It seem that his concept of school was meant to develop human minds in which-ever directions they wanted to develop but not necessarily equipping them for earning bread and butter i.e. it was not practical schooling meant to tackle the problems of life, an important part of which no doubt requires earning livelihood.

In order that Tagore's ideas enter the development discourse, one has to be clear about the meaning of development. Tagore did not favour poverty but was opposed to alleviation of poverty in the modern sense of the term. Progress did not mean increase of GDP. Probably, I guess, he was in favour of reducing inequality by imparting an elite type of education to the lower sections of the society. We do not know which strata of people joined his schools.

In order to understand Tagore's concept of education, the following points require elaboration.

1. The difference between nationalism and State nationalism
2. Whether education imparted in school or elsewhere requires some sort of syllabus for different classes. How is that syllabus different from the syllabus prescribed for schools today?
3. How do students move from one class to another?
4. At what stage children should be left to choose their subjects ? Should anyone guide them by placing various choices, their pros and cons or leave them without any guidance?
5. How is poverty removal possible without increase in the national income? Will they be mature enough to exercise their option?
6. How one can create the spirit of advancement or motivate the children to excel in life, whichever sphere they choose?
7. What should be the motive force in driving the society towards advancement?
8. How can the questioning approach be imparted/continued? Children start questioning at a very early age in life and for most of the questions, we do not have any answer. We simply ask them to accept whatever we (elders) say. How can this acceptance approach be discontinued? Whether the early education should be in one's mother tongue and at what stage other languages introduced?

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## Continuing The Dialogue

'The Poet's Challenge to Schooling: Creative Freedom for the Human Soul' bears testimony to the immortality of Tagore's understanding of the essence of living. Perhaps Santiniketan did not blossom as he would have liked it to, nor perhaps all the other experiments he planted. Indeed, Tagore's most important contribution was not Santiniketan but the acknowledgement of the spirit and nature of what it is to be human on earth. That his views and opinions continue to be relevant and discussible speak of a clarity of mind, ideas and a vision that have yet to be harvested for humanity. This is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of what Tagore sparked off by a lifetime dedicated to creative reflection — he is able to comment on and communicate with social realities and generations far beyond his time.

This booklet is most laudable in its attempt to continue dialogue with Tagore. That schooling is discussed within the framework of foundational conceptualisations of who a human being is and the nature of the System within which it operates creates a holistic framework for analysis and action. This exploratory framework of understanding could serve as an interesting idea for further research in general, and even on other issue areas that Tagore reflected on — namely, women, religion, etc. Below I have listed some issue areas that may be worthy of further independent study:

### *How Tagore Sought to Challenge the System: Basic Principles/Strategies/Learnings*

Tagore's insight into the oppressive consequences of the dominant notions of Development and Progress is highly unsettling. Especially considering that his warning seems to have gone unheeded these many decades. It successfully yanks the rug from under the excuse that we had no way of envisioning the dehumanising aspects of the model of Development adopted for India after 1947. Today, when most of the Development critique is largely Western in origin, it is interesting to discover that Eastern thinkers like Tagore were aware and critical of Development decades ago. Reintroducing his opinions in the education and development discourse could infuse new spirit, maybe even raise a storm (since they, very fundamentally, question dominant assumptions and promises of Education, Development and Progress).

In view of this, it would be interesting to delve into the modes of operation Tagore adopted or desired to adopt to challenge dominant institutions and their exploitative relationships that characterise the System. Shilpa has laid out one of these in the booklet — namely that through the establishment of Santiniketan Tagore sought to help individuals nurture their creative and critical thinking capacities, such that they could subsequently organise against the System constructively.

- Since the booklet focuses on schooling, there is perhaps lesser elaboration on other modes that Tagore desired to adopt or support — notably Sriniketan, and rural reconstruction. What was Tagore's conception of a rural India? How did Tagore envision its continued existence and what manner of change did he advocate for this?
- Tagore's understanding of challenging the System may also be understood from his conceptualisations of Santiniketan (or any other of the institutes he established) and its relationship with the immediate political and socio-economic environments. How did the function of Santiniketan impact or relate to the villages around it? What role did Tagore envisage for the villages around Santiniketan in challenging the System, and nurturing the human spirit?
- What led to the emergence of the Shiksha-Satra? What are the conceptual differences between Santiniketan and Shiksha-Satra? Explorations into these areas would perhaps illuminate additional dimensions of Tagore's tireless effort and hope for society and humankind.
- Tagore earnestly desired to witness the meeting of the West and East. How did Tagore view the West? What lessons did he think we could learn from their mode of development and progress? Tagore's desires and opinions for societal transformation could perhaps also be gleaned from interpreting his interactions with prominent personalities of the West and correlating these with his ideas of "Western" thought and meanings.

### *Learning Spaces for the Individual that Tagore Recognised and Nurtured*

- Tagore's undying faith in the limitless and transformative potential of human nature is evident in the hidden transcripts of resistance that people (children and adults all over the world) engage in everyday. A pertinent question would be: where is the Tagorean human spirit alive today? How can we nurture/ regenerate it to create new spaces, relationships and meanings of living?
- Honing this human nature to help "to make the boy/girl a full person when s/he grows up" involves the nurturing of "faculties for self-preservation, self-confidence, self-respect and self-awareness". In view of his awesome conceptualisations of a child, Tagore may have dwelt on the spaces of learning that exist within relationships other than those with Nature and Teacher. An exploration into these other spaces of learning outside the school could be significant, especially because Santiniketan, as Tagore envisioned it, was residential and isolated from larger society, with all influences directed by the Teacher and Nature as co-learners. What place did Tagore allocate other learning spaces as important contributors to this nurturing process?

*Role of Effective Modes of Communication in Learning, Assimilating and Dialoguing*

Tagore communicated his ideas in a myriad number of ways — through songs, poetry, dance, dramas, stories, essays, lectures, conversations, letters, projects, etc. Much of what he wrote, sang or said was concerned with society and the human condition.

- A study of the transformative effectiveness of the expression channels he made use of could reveal interesting media ideas for communication for construction. The use of so many media may have a direct bearing on the clarity of dialogue and discussion possible today on Tagore's opinions, A related study may answer questions like what ensures the continued living of an idea, a spirit, a conceptualisation, a meaning and understanding beyond the mortal limits?

*In Addition...*

- As a Christian, in the limited knowledge I have of Tagore, I am very impressed with the sensitivity with which he has commented on Christianity. Though I may not agree with him on all counts, I greatly appreciate the effort he has taken to empathise with doctrinal interpretations, its theological implications in the life of a Christian, even going so far as to interpret socio-political reality on these terms. I bring this in here because I think that spaces to discuss and disagree on theological issues are almost non-existent today. A deep commitment to the human spirit such as that of Tagore's comes from a genuine effort to understand meanings of existence that people identify with. It is only through such efforts that constructive meaningful dialogue and organisation for transformation are possible. In all the potential that Tagore conceptualised in a human being and in a collective of human beings, this effort and sensitivity is very much at the core. Thus, there is probably a lot to learn, to harvest, from a study of the principles and process via which Tagore channeled his own learning through his lifetime.
- Also, wider questions about the sustenance and growth of ideas through time would be interesting to explore. Shilpa has laid down very distinctly reasons that led to the erosion of Tagore's vision. But is the erosion of a vision the norm? Where have visions been preserved in spirit and nurtured according to changing contexts? Why have these been able to live past the lifetime of the visionary? What are the processes of co-optation and erosion of the vision spirit that takes place? Is this a natural, acceptable process?

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— Nand Chaturvedi  
*Poet and Retired Teacher, Vidya Bhawan  
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### Poetic Meets Tragic: Tagore in the Light of Max Weber

In exploring and interpreting a wide corpus of Tagore's writings, Shilpa Jain has done a service to believers, Indian and otherwise, in hope and change. Tagore's legend and life's work stands grand in the Indian consciousness, its greatness unquestioned. But if we are to take our saints *seriously*, to view our own situation unflinchingly in their light, then we will be much aided by readings as sensitive and sympathetic as Miss Jain's.

Shilpa reveals Tagore's views of education and human possibility to be animated by a kind of religious purity. His starting point is spiritual freedom, and he derives from that a beautiful, indeed poetic, vision for how we might be and learn together. Both poetry and religion shine in this passage from *Personality*: "[our youth] should not have mere schools for their lessons, but a world whose guiding spirit is personal love. It must be an ashram where men have gathered for the highest end of life, in the peace of nature . . . where they are bidden to realize man's world as God's Kingdom to whose citizenship they have to aspire."<sup>1</sup>

I would like, in this brief comment, to juxtapose Tagore's vision, pure and hopeful, with that of someone of a far different disposition: the German social theorist Max Weber. Writing like Tagore around the turn of the last century, Weber's intellectual stance is more that of a scholar, reaching for objectivity and sobriety, than that of a believer and poet. Weber's primary scholarly concern was discerning the character and trajectory of the elusive condition that is today often termed modernity.

Weber's thought is wide-ranging and complex, and space will only allow the crudest of distillations here. I would like to evoke two essential strands in Weber's diagnosis of modernity. First, Weber sees the modern world as defined by the splintering of forms of rationality, and the development of parallel, independent, coexisting and yet incompatible ways of viewing the world. In Weber's view, the state, the economy, the arts, the sciences, religion, and other spheres in modernity each have their own rationality, an internally consistent and increasingly principled way of understanding the world. For modern economics, it is the logic of profit maximization and the currency of capital. For the state, it is the logic of power and the administration and institutionalization of coercive force. For religion, it is the logic of unconditional, universal brotherly love.

Each of these spheres represents an essential facet of modern life, and yet the rationalities are not compatible with one another. The instrumentalism and profit maximization of the market makes no sense from the religious perspective of love, and vice versa. Weber describes our willingness to live along such incommensurable lines as a kind of existentially unstable polytheism, with the various rationalities fracturing our collective consciousness like multiple, contradictory gods. "We live as did the ancients when their world was not yet disenchanted of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanted and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity."<sup>2</sup>

By Weber's lights, then, it is no surprise that Tagore rejects what Shilpa likes to call "the System." That's exactly what any consistently religious ethic, faced with the modern rationality of state or economy, must do. Weber puts it quite plainly here in terms of the modern state: "The state's absolute end is to safeguard (or to change) the external and internal distribution of power; ultimately, this end must seem meaningless to any universalist religion of salvation."<sup>3</sup> But this brings me to the second point I would like to draw out from Weber, namely the tragic *intransigence* of the modern condition.

For Weber, the religious purist's rejection of the state is consistent but irresponsible. The state is deeply with us, by Weber's judgment, and rejecting it on principle is only to turn blindly from the unsavory but unavoidable problems of the day. Considering those who choose to follow an ethic of ultimate ends—that is, a religious ethic of love—in the political realm, Weber writes, "in nine out of ten cases I deal with windbags who do not fully realize what they take upon themselves but who intoxicate themselves with romantic sensations."<sup>4</sup> Rejection of the "system" is too easy an answer. In the name of purity, it runs from that which is inescapable. Weber does not assert that modern spheres were intransigent from their birth. He acknowledges that they may have been intended to "lie on the shoulders . . . like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment." "But fate," Weber writes famously, "decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage."<sup>5</sup>

I have presented here Weber's claim of intransigence without his argument. Perhaps readers will turn to his writings to judge for themselves whether he is right. But for the purposes of this comment, let us assume that we—a community of activists, after all—do not take the iron cage as the last word. I for one am a Gandhian: I believe in the possibility of transforming the modern systems of state and economy according to a higher, spiritual truth. But I do not cast Weber off altogether. I find his tragic sensibility to be an important and complicating complement to the more hopeful Gandhian perspective.

Indeed, I think Weber provides a useful lens through which to view Tagore's experiments in education. In stepping away from modern education and cultivating what began as his radical alternative at Santiniketan, we can certainly discern in Tagore what Weber calls the religious rejection of the world. As Shilpa explains, Tagore needed to reject the logic of the existing "system" in order to recreate education in the mold of spirituality. One might analogize Tagore's experiment's relationship to the modern world with that of the "back to the land" movement that was popular in the United States in the 1960s and 70s. Small groups of people came together to reject modern life, and turned to simpler, more communal, and often more moral ways of living. Interestingly, back-to-the-landers were also often proponents of home- or community- schooling. For the activist interested in the spiritualization of public life, these experiments are inspiring. They give us glimpses of what radically spiritual life might look like.

Weber serves to remind us, however, that these experiments are contingent, and small, and represent a kind of turning away from the bulk of what modern societies have gotten themselves into. For these reasons, they are more like escapes from, rather than solutions to, modernity's deepest problems.

Weber's perspective points the spiritually ambitious activist, then, to a set of tough questions. What would it mean to not only turn away from modernity, for the purpose of recreation and experimentation, but to turn *back* to face squarely the complex systems we live with? How might we begin to introduce Tagore's ideals into the present education system? How can we balance Tagore's indisputable embrace of creativity and flexibility with the modern state's obligation to educate all of India's children? The *ideal* of a universal right to education, even if far from fulfilled, is certainly one of modernity's virtues. And we may be guilty of Weber's "windbag" allegation if put trust in the spontaneous emergence of Tagore-like experiments across the land. How, then, can Tagorian ideals of love and creativity be incorporated into a set of consistent, long-lasting institutions that reach all children? It seems to me that these are the sorts of questions that Weber's thought begs us, as activists, to ask. These are exactly the questions, furthermore, that will help us bridge the gap between normative reflection on what the world should look like and a constructive program for change that helps the poor and suffering of the world in the here and now.

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First, I want to say that I learned a lot from your paper. You managed in a short space to put a lot. It is packed with ideas, and there is no way I can respond to all that richness in a short message. I hope some day we will continue this “conversation” about Tagore - and others. My trip to Mexico [to learn with the Zapatistas in Chiapas] added to my conviction that we had the wrong address (the West) in our efforts to communicate. The West is soulless...

This brings me to the main concern I have about your paper. You use for example the phrase “systemic transformation” and a methodology which are basically Western. In relation to systemic transformation, may be you mean something that was not clear to me from your paper. What do you mean? And, did Tagore use it? From the quotes you had, it doesn't seem he used it.

There are certain words such as change (as a planned goal) which we use more when we are young. I used them when I was young. As we get older, we talk more about life which embodies change as a natural accompaniment of living rather than planned. If you give examples of what you mean by “systemic transformation” and “change” that makes your use of them different from what usually comes to people's minds when they hear them, it will help. The problem with some words (such as systemic transformation, change, education, development, rights, democracy, etc) is that they have dominant meanings/ connotations in people's minds that make their use fall victim to the dominant meaning. Words such as inspiration, hope, faith, simplicity... (which you use and which Tagore uses) are much more difficult to co-opt.

Inspiration, living, faith in humanity, and working in small groups necessarily embody change. This change is different from one where we control the outcome/ result. Controlling the outcome is contrary to learning and having faith in humanity. I am not saying that you want to control the outcome, but clarifying through examples how your use of the term does not include this control will be helpful. Planned change (just like progress, development, education...) embodies control. Tagore (as I understood him from your paper) is more interested in principles than in change. Tagore had a lot of faith in humanity. This implies that change, transformation, and even Freire's conscientization, are contrary to this faith.

In one of my articles, “Community Education: To Reclaim and Transform What Has Been Made Invisible” (*Harvard Educational Review*, Vol.60, No.1, February 1990), I used the term transformation in the title. I really believed that what was needed is to transform my mother's knowledge to something more legitimate, like my knowledge. Now I know better. I can't do that without killing it or deforming it. Now, what I believe we need is to put a lot of effort to see and appreciate and make room for knowledges and ways of life which we cannot squeeze into the dominant forms. We need to protect them from us and work on ourselves.

I don't feel we can squeeze somebody like Tagore (who is full of life, simplicity, ...) into a lifeless methodology which is used in western scholarship. I felt that you are assuming that the methodology is neutral. In a way, it is part of what Tagore criticizes. You say in p1: “The system of education is a form of thought-control.” Isn't the type of analysis you followed a part of this? Wouldn't the use of more stories, anecdotes, examples ... be more suitable for people to “re-open the space to interpret”(p.1) Tagore and others and to re-contextualize them?

My problem with Tagore himself is that he seems to have believed he can create learning in school forms. May be that's why his experiment was easily co-opted. Simply, education cannot be improved. It is like trying to improve jails. It is possible, but that does not change their nature.

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Shilpa Jain's essay is a remarkably perceptive analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's views on education, and his larger critique of modernity. In her "generative and critical analysis," Shilpa goes to the core of the issues that confronted Tagore, and her discussion of the relevance of these ideas for our times is very timely. Although the essay focuses on a specific set of problems connected to "shiksha" (i.e., education), its findings have larger implications for those engaged in a critical assessment of the contemporary world. The dominant themes of the essay clearly cut to the core of what David Scott in a recent work has called "the demands of the political present," and in this sense, Shilpa's discussion of Tagore's deeply humanistic vision presents us with a very useful counterpoint to those who advocate a technocratic, bureaucratic, materialistic, and scientific view of the world.

The essay ends with a set of questions. One that I find particularly challenging pertains to the way in which we can define what it means for individuals to be part of a community, of a society. Tagore's views on this question were shaped to a large extent by his reaction to western imperialism, and what he considered its most pernicious offshoot: the nation-state. Tagore's prolonged exchanges with Gandhi, as well as his studied distance from the national movement were rooted in his remarkably complex view of what it meant to be "human." A national community was for him an oxymoron, since nationalism — by definition — attempted to homogenize and stifle human creativity in the interest of the common good, or the welfare state. Partly as an extension of this rationale, he considered man's search for swaraj — as growing out of a harmonious relationship with nature and his soul — a necessary pre-requisite for a real sense of community. To put it differently, Tagore considered the attainment of swaraj (and therefore real freedom) the ultimate goal, one that would precede the emergence of a community of moral agents.

If my reading of Tagore is correct, I find his ideas remarkably prescient in their critique of modernity. His views on humanism are also very useful as the basis for constructing a vision for the future. It is however in his view of politics and social justice that I find him less convincing. Tagore's commitment to universalistic humanism made him very suspicious of political mobilizations, and justifiably so. He was very critical of those who advocated change through organized movements. This was because he felt that political movements stifled the voices and creativity of individuals. In this sense, he was suspicious of any leader that attempted to lay down an agenda for a larger group of individuals to follow. His letters to Gandhi (especially those that pertained to Gandhi's use of the "charkha" as a symbol for the anti-colonial struggle) illustrate this very effectively. For Tagore, the locus of any political act was the individual who had attained a sense of humanistic swaraj, and was acting in response to his desire for freedom and creativity. To put it more directly, Tagore's search for what it means to be "human" (a search shaped by his reaction to the totalizing forces of modernity), lead him to present us with a somewhat simplistic view of what it means to be "social." In my opinion, this is somewhat problematic because it leaves little room for a discussion of how the exercise of power shapes the world, and in turn, how individuals as members of social groups search for justice. The limited success of Tagore's experiments with Shantiniketan could perhaps be viewed in this light. Shilpa's description of Shantiniketan shows that it succeeded best when it attempted to liberate individuals from the oppression of schooling, but at no point did it directly engage with the political and economic challenges facing colonial India. Shantiniketan served as a haven for those searching "creative freedom for the human soul," but its greatest shortcoming, and perhaps a reason for its subsequent decline, was its inability to engage with questions of a socio-political and economic nature in a way that resonated with a larger population.

None of these criticisms however diminish the power of Tagore's ideas, or their pertinence for dilemmas facing the modern world. Shilpa's analysis succeeds in bringing out the strongest elements of Tagore's ideas, especially as they pertain to education. A longer discussion of how Tagore's location in society shaped his views would have been very useful. Overall however, the essay is a remarkable work of synthesis.

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The Poet's Challenge to Schooling is a very thoughtful piece, with an impressive amount of research, especially the interviews.

In my own thinking about education over the last few years, I've been very attracted to the mystics, poets, and artists as a wellspring of insight into educational possibility. I was delighted to meet Tagore, and begin to see the deep connections between his social and educational vision with the visions of thinkers such as Rudolf Steiner, Ivan Illich, St. Benedict, and even Jesus. All of these visionaries invite us to live from a rationality outside the economic, outside the conventional, outside the mass produced mainstream. They invite us to live in beauty, love, connectedness, and simplicity. They speak of a world we glimpse in moments of joy—a world which, as the Sufis say, "those who have tasted, know."

For those who have tasted the world Tagore calls us to enter, the sensibility of his pedagogy is clear. From the values and habits of living in freedom and creativity, a more organic pedagogy flows that does not require bureaucracy. For several years now, I've had the intuition that religious communities and institutions in multiple forms—ashram, kibbutz, monastery—have developed authentic and integrative modes of worship, work, and learning. I envision your insight into Tagore as contributing to a larger conversation about how we can recover, from a perspective of "critical traditionalism", the unity of human growth and social goodness using the religious/spiritual traditions as a guide. One interesting resource along these lines is the World Faiths Development Dialogue, a group of religious leaders that has gathered to critique development from the perspectives of their traditions.

For those who have not tasted, or who have become convinced that there is no life outside the constructs of advertising, it is probably difficult to understand what Tagore is talking about. Your reflections on the demise of the ideals at Santiniketan is very instructive about the power of bureaucratic forces to erode experiments. Are there remnants of Tagore's ideals that might spark some reassertion of freedom and creativity there? I wonder, what kinds of experiences and dialogues might help people realize their own connection with moments of freedom and beauty, in ways that they could appreciate Tagore's vision?

Tagore's rejection of borrowing inauthentic models and ideas from the West seems particularly poignant for India at the moment. In workshops locally, it might be useful to examine, in concrete terms, all of the ways in which India's own resources are being neglected in the rush to copy the west. Another interesting exercise might be to imagine an alternative kind of development index, grounded in Tagore's ideals of simplicity and freedom, as opposed to a focus on material accumulation. (Of course, spiritual well-being is not something we'd want to measure or quantify.) As part of this effort, it may be useful to highlight communities and groups in India that seem to be doing very poorly, in conventional terms, but experience their lives to be quite rich, free, and creative on their own terms.

Thank you for sharing your fine work with me and others. Asserting the importance of Tagore for today's world is itself an important act that challenges technical, economic, and efficiency-oriented rationalities in the service of a more beautiful and fulfilling world.

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Rabindranath Tagore's work on education and learning is of great significance and is not as well known as it should be in the West. In keeping with the richness and diversity of Tagore's vision, I would like to comment on the superb paper by Shilpa Jain that explores not only Tagore's philosophy but his impact on the essential spirit, if not the soul of what it means to learn and be taught.

I would like to recount an experience, which I had some years ago during a visit to an experimental school in California, and how it affected my own expectations about teaching and learning. I was invited to a Rudolf Steiner School to examine their approach as well as to learn more about how they hoped to change the experience of learners in a positive and constructive fashion. I have many doubts about the underlying religious foundations for Steiner education, but I saw something that really affected me that is closely linked to the spirit of Tagore's perspective on education. My hosts took me to a small elementary school that had been built at the edge of an agricultural area. Once inside the school, I noticed that the ceilings were quite low and that the furniture was considerably smaller than I had anticipated. One classroom had a very small door built into a larger one and as I looked into the classroom, I noticed that the desks were also smaller than usual. I asked the Director of the school why this was so and she explained that they had decided to tailor the architecture to the size of the children in order to make them more comfortable with the scale of the space. This struck me as an extraordinary idea. Children see the world around them from a very different perspective. Adults can seem like giants even when they are gentle. Scale, perspective and space are crucial components of a child's world, but are often disregarded. In fact, the general architecture of schools is poor and rarely takes students and their experience as a central premise for the design process. These factors are not minor ones for learners. Why would the school system be so unaware of their importance? There are many reasons for this, but perhaps the most important is a lack of synchronicity between the higher purpose of learning and the everyday needs of learners.

This goes to the heart of one of Tagore's concerns, which is the relationship between creativity and freedom. Schools are presently designed to teach students and are not centred on the principles of learning. The lack of a holistic viewpoint of the sort suggested by Tagore is missing. Keep in mind, that my own view of learning is that it is very ephemeral and that for the most part, schools have outlived their usefulness and need to be completely rethought. This point of view is summarized in the following quote from Jain's piece: "the very act of creation is freedom, for it allows human beings to discover their full potential. They have the opportunity to live what is theirs, to make the world of their own selection, and to move it through their own movement."

In order for creativity to be released and for students to discover their real purpose in learning, they have to have the power to criticize and reflect upon the experiences that they are having. This is much more difficult than it appears. It is part of a double bind. If the students themselves have not learned enough to make their criticism rigorous and well-thought out, then their commentary will fall on deaf ears. On the other hand, if the environment does not facilitate the growth and the development of enough intellectual acuity, the quality of their discourse will be poor. This is not dissimilar to Tagore's commentary on the alienating experience that students have as they struggle with the banality of school and the lack of respect for nature and spirituality in the school system.

From my own perspective as the President of an undergraduate University of Art and Design, I am most interested the history of Santiniketan, the ashram that Tagore founded which turned into a school and now is a university. My own experience has taught me that institutions are very far away from understanding their own cultures with enough depth to engage in real change. This may seem like a dramatic statement, but the reality is that even the best of leaders tire out very quickly as they encounter increasingly complex levels of resistance to sometimes urgently needed shifts. The question is what is it about an educational institution that breeds so much resistance. The answer is not a simple one because there are also numerous institutions in which radical thinking is taking place. There is something fundamental about schooling that Tagore understood. In order to keep a school going the experience has to be systematized, that is, days have to be ordered and classes scheduled and marks given. Yet, it is precisely structures of this kind, which inhibit the development of open spaces and places for learning. What is unclear about Tagore's perspective is how to 'free' up institutions - how to create enough of a sense of community to sustain open-ended enquiry and freshness of thinking. Tagore looked to nature as an example and in this he is quite close to the thinking of Thoreau and Rousseau. It is unclear how long that openness can be maintained without introducing some expectations both on the part of learners and teachers. In other words, there is a profound romanticism at the core of Tagore's thinking and practice. It is a romanticism

that I support, but for which there is no social, political or cultural consensus. Even Tagore's use of art and music mirrors many other experiments from Steiner through to Montessori.

Jain's paper explores all the facets of Tagore's wonderful effort to build a new way of thinking about the world and about learning, but it fails to address the fundamental issues of institutional culture and institutional change. Given the large number of people are seeking to learn and the incredible investment of time and money into institutions ostensibly devoted to learning, strategies of institutional transformation seem to me to hold the key to future change in education.

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Rabindranath Tagore's lifework and message comes down to a spiritual and moral basis for living. His contributions to life-long-learning are grounded on selfless service, love and respect. He espouses to a heightened sense of individual or independent inquisitiveness in pursuit of meaningful answers in order to pave the way for purposeful learning. He regards nature as the teacher in the school of life where faith and science have space to work — together, in harmony, supporting one another. These in turn provide the tools for obtaining true freedom – individual and collective – and transform the limitations of self and greed – so prevalent today – into happiness. Happiness is ultimately where individuals, the world over, presumably hope to attain or live towards.

Given this common objective, it is not unreasonable to believe that the fundamental verities imbedded within Tagore's ideas are not inherently his own, for others in the educational arena have arisen in various lands. Educators such as Grundtvig in Denmark (Allchin, 1993) and Lindeman (1926) in the United States have couched their thoughts and ideas to fit their own cultural and historical contexts. However, I will focus on Elizardo Pérez, a little known Bolivian educator, one who's ideas eventually were to inspire indigenous education movements from Mexico to Argentina and whose career parallels Tagore's in several areas.

Elizardo Pérez, like Tagore who started a place for learning at Santiniketan, also began a learning space called *Warisata*, named after a nearby community in the north central Andes.<sup>1</sup> Pérez attempted to bring about and promote the learning spaces, opportunities, and relationships essential to a harmonious way of living. He saw the inherent worth of individuals and sought to provide a space for self-actualization while still being a part of a whole – the community at large (Salazar, 1995).

*Warisata* was an indigenous educational movement that started in 1931 and spread to 16 community learning centers across the country (Salazar, 1995). It was one of the most meaningful attempts to translate indigenous cosmology, tradition and daily living into practice in an educational setting. As with Santiniketan in its early years, the teachers and students were encouraged to live in close proximity to each other and to foster an intergenerational learning-ful relationship. Education centered around 'house-craft,' 'handicraft,' engaging with nature, interacting with local knowledge and life of the community (Jain, 2000) in much the same way as the first years at Santiniketan.

Learning, as Pérez described it, was grounded in simplicity of life, a strong connection to *pachamama* or mother earth, and service to others. The Inca moral laws of: *ama sua*, *ama lulla*, *ama kella* or "do not lie," "do not steal," and "do not be lazy" (Salazar, 1995, p. 90) were very much a part of community life at *Warisata*. Pérez promoted the reaffirmation of local knowledge systems, legitimizing indigenous culture and providing a starting point from which to articulate meaningful educational endeavors that stepped outside the confines set by northern canons of schooling. He, like Tagore, was a revolutionary individual both in his actions and in his writings.

The *Warisata* learning spaces lasted a decade before being completely dismantled by an anti-indigenous government (Rojas, 1996). This experience, was to inspire the development of indigenous educational movements throughout Latin America (Pérez, 1992, Botelho et al., 1992; Salazar, 1991). Yet, unlike Santiniketan, the *Warisata* experience never resumed after government intervention in 1941. Perhaps, the quandary that Jain brings up "...to ask our selves if institutions should simply die out when they suffer from near-total inertia and spiritual decay" (Jain, 2000, p. 38) is one that should surface more often both in theory and in practice.

Since the *Warisata* experience, the socio-political context of Bolivia has changed to such an extent that Pérez's vision would fall short of his dream. In the same way, India has changed and the Santiniketan of Tagore's time could not and does not function as it was originally intended. Yet there are important lessons from these experiences that can be used to form the basis for a new experience, one that is in tune with the world today. Both Pérez and Tagore built upon existing knowledge and experiences unique to their time in history and context and combined them into a form that was of benefit and service during their day. Tagore spoke of the need for vision, action, and dialogue; while acknowledging these, Pérez might well have added individual and collective transformation – both tangible outcomes of the *Warisata* experience.

What can we and future generations learn from these experiences? Essentially, the guidance that remains after all is shed-off are spiritual and moral codes which should be implemented in a spirit of love, cooperation, and self-sacrifice and carried out through continual consultation by those involved. Tagore and Pérez suggest that these are the tools that constitute the foundation for a society that fosters love and respect. These are essential in order to withstand the onslaught of continuous change that is inherent to life. In the end, both Santiniketan and *Warisata* failed to meet the objectives set out at the outset, and yet the underlying spirit of love and service imbedded in these experiences remains intact – for it is not the end which is important but the process of getting there.

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Much of Shilpa Jain's extraordinary analysis of Tagore's indelible contribution to education can be summed up in one of Tagore's poems, "Where The Mind is Without Fear:"

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high  
Where knowledge is free  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls  
Where words come out from the depth of truth  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit  
Where the mind is led forward by thee  
Into ever-widening thought and action  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake

The metaphors and concepts it brings forth are as relevant today as they were when he held forth as a pioneer. In an age of "accountability," where students' testing achievements are "counted," rather than their thoughts and feelings acknowledged, he tolls a bell about the high-cost of quantification for its own sake – nothing less than the loss of the human spirit. His words toll a bell of warning about what, in the end, shall be determined an "educated" human being. At its best, the testing craze shall undermine the power of curriculum, creativity, and new designs for learning to experiment, discover, and inquire; at its worst, schooling shall be create a generation that has no respect for tradition, for art, for the ineffable, for teams, and for faith in notions of freedom and innovation.

A mind without fear; knowledge as freedom; a world that is whole rather than fragmented; the transcendence of artificial distinctions made by the nation-state; the power of truth; the nature of striving or process, rather than product alone; the use of reason for human benefit; the challenging of dogma; the expansion of intellect and the limitless capacity of growth, if only human beings were given the freedom and respect they deserve.

The implications for schooling are enormous, for these are notions that reflect timelessness and durability, yet are not encased in an unyielding "ism" so deleterious to educational practice.

Shilpa Jain's explication of Tagore's work is also important for the evidence of learning as an inherently human activity that transcends borders. In short, the debate in India about teaching and learning is different only in form, rather than in content, from the debates in the United States. It is also evident that these views are held by a minority in both countries and perhaps many others as well.

I cannot claim to expand the analysis of Tagore's work; I can, however, demonstrate how the elements of this one poem have implications for education that mirror my own research. On another level – far more spiritual in nature – the poem strikes a responsive chord deep within me. It is precisely at that level, deep in the heart, where learning truly takes place. I hope, then, to create a balance between the objective and the subjective, the external and the internal. Only then can the fullness of this poem be given the respect it is due.

#### *A Research View*

In this modern era, what does school hold for teenagers? Though the lay public is informed about educational systems outside of their own through comparative testing in fields such as math and science, a larger view of whole systems shows a staggering gap between the information and resource haves and have nots. Some young people attend rarified private schools.

Some do not go to school at all. Numerous teachers, in war-torn countries long simply to gather teenagers together to learn, in safety, regardless of the school's philosophy. Others are wearing Japanese Walkman(s), listening to America's Madonna, and carrying Russian or Chinese rifles poised for guerilla warfare; some in America succeed against all odds, others fail despite huge resources. Some go to school each day with an aching sense of vulnerability in an era of unprecedented school violence; some teens attend class up to a certain age or time in the day, then go directly to work, whether it be in a factory run by a world-wide mega-merger, or out in the fields. Many teenagers are increasingly barraged by a 100-channel paralysis. They reflect the violence and anomie of modern life, yet they also exhibit extraordinary, selfless acts of human courage, alacrity,

creativity, and kindness. We need to ask: “What do they need to meet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead?” “How can these children, in turn, raise the village?”

Educators around the globe acknowledge that the challenge of these times is upon them. Teachers in remote regions hitherto untouched represent an enormous – and largely untapped area – of rich knowledge, for now the educational arena is challenged and enriched by new thinkers in countries largely dismissed. The future in education will be shaped, largely, by these new, profound phenomena. In *Shadows in the Sun* (1998), David Wade address the impact of globalization on indigenous ways of knowing:

After half a century of profound change, what, indeed, is tradition? How can we expect a people not to adapt? The Inuit language is alive. The men are still hunters. They use snares, make snow houses, know the power of medicinal herbs. They also own boats, snowmobiles, television sets, and satellite phones. Some drink, some attend church. As anthropologist Hugh Brody points out, what must be defended is not the traditional as opposed to the modern, but, rather, the right a free indigenous people to choose the components of their lives (Wade, 1998, p. 25).

“The 1980s and 1990s have seen many different countries radically reorganize their state-maintained schooling systems (Walford, 1996, p.3; Giddens, 1990; Riel, 1990).” Words such as “restructuring,” “decentralization,” “educational perestroika,” “local legitimization” characterize school reform efforts worldwide (Conley, 1991; Bessard, 1993; Westbury, 1989).

Howard Gardner’s *The Disciplined Mind* (1999) reflects this wider, global perspective:

Whether I am traveling in the United States or visiting Europe, Latin America, or the Far East, I find a surprising consensus: the belief that the quality of a nation’s educational system will be a chief – perhaps the chief – determinant of its success during the next century and beyond. (Gardner, 1999, p.13).

Reformers are studying brain research, learning modalities, experiential education, collaborative curriculum planning, and the benefits of teams (De Cuevas, 1994, p.37; Steinberg, 1997). Others contend that emotional intelligence – one’s street savvy and social perspicacity – leads to success; schooling may, in fact, obscure this native ability (Goldman, 1996). Perhaps Mark Twain was correct, one-hundred years ago, when he wrote that schooling should not get in the way of one’s education. For better or worse, this new age has implications for education at a given nation’s local level.

Researchers and practitioners claim that outmoded notions of education as a *quantity* of knowledge to ingest and retain have given way to new paradigms, new *qualities* of thinking: the capacity for independence of thought, creativity, applicability, and the ability to work with others (Lightfoot, 1993; Estrada & McLaren, 1993).

These new approaches to curriculum and pedagogy do not belong to one country or culture alone, but are sweeping the worldwide landscape (Lawton, 1992; Weiler, 1990).

A learning community is emerging on the Internet, where ‘Cyberia’ could replace schools as the focus of education reform...‘Cyberia’ is intended not simply as a new name for information technology in the late twentieth century, but to suggest that science and technology have become a dominant source of culture itself” (Lyman, 1997, p. 299).

John Abbott, of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Initiatives, writes about how Rodin’s *The Thinker*, the solitary individual working out the hard problems, has dwindling relevance in our digital world (Abbott, 1994). The conversation around virtual schools centers on a reconstructionist orientation, made possible by the Internet and other forms of distance education (Noden, 1995; Zukowski, 1995) and have raised questions about new architectures for learning, new pedagogical approaches, new ideas for human resources, and a transformed curriculum.

Reformers have yet to assemble and make coherent a practical, culturally-grounded framework, in which the best of tradition and indigenous ways of knowing meet the best of the modern world (Cuban, 1990, pp. 2-13;

Turner, 1998). They must confront established norms, cultural mores, government intrusion, and general resistance to change. In both developed and underdeveloped countries, the impact of the change efforts in the last fifteen years are described as “slow,” “haphazard,” “spotty,” “inconclusive,” “quixotic,” and “restless” (Berman, 1989; Bepalko, 1996; McAdams, 1993; Tucker, 1993). The have-mores remain successful and the have-less are increasing in number. Though recent technological advances may develop the potential for students of diverse cultures to develop skills to solve problems and think creatively, the evidence is not yet substantial enough to demonstrate long-term results (Goldberg, 1995).

At the very least, educators worldwide might need to think in terms that not only serve their locality, but also transcend their geographic boundaries. Educators must discover what educational shapes are needed for this global state in which transactions move between cultures at the speed of light, when cultures are attacked as “impediments” to progress, when testing on facts seems to prevail over the quality of thinking that makes connections *between* facts? Educators must evaluate the impact of the United States on their own culture, what of their own culture must not only endure but prevail, what one’s people need in order to be educated - beyond utility, beyond technological gadgetry, beyond economic potential (Butts, 1980).

At the secondary level, where young teenagers’ minds are exploding, educators must confront the question: How can educators, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, merge adolescence (again, *adolescere* - to nourish, to fuel, to burn, to kindle) and education (*e-ducare* <Latin: e-out +d ucere, to lead, draw bring>) within the context of a new millennium?

Educators must make decisions about how to educate, how to organize learning, and how to prepare young people for a world that is dynamic and accelerated, for a world that cannot wait (Goodlad, 1984; Perlman, 1993). Though the evidence for world-connected, world-influenced educational settings is growing, *it also remains to be seen whether schools, even in urban settings, will adopt this global sensibility for the long term and be informed by a set of philosophical qualities that can inform the work.*

Such efforts, certainly, must be approached from the standpoint of a contextual, organizational, and cultural analysis of how change takes place within educational settings. Some will plunge in. Others may take a reluctant, even resistant position in reaction to a history of failed reform efforts that have contributed to cynicism (Scheerens, 1988). Highlighting the tensions, schools may turn into vehicles whose primary mission is the transmission of national and cultural orthodoxies, rather than flexible structures able to adapt to new demands and challenges (Ogilvy, 1995).

If Tagore were alive today, he would not allow reform efforts to proceed without an examination of world context, of the impact of technology on information access and creativity, and on how freedom to think would be preserved. Alfred North Whitehead once wrote: “traditional is the dead ideas of the living; tradition is the living ideas of the dead.” You can’t teach an old dogma new tricks, I often say. How long will it take for us to realize that educational reform, without an examination of assumptions, simply re-forms old patterns?

#### *A Personal View*

There was once a teacher, a rabbi, who lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a man whose depth and passion earned him the title: Baal Shem Tov, Master of the Good Name. The Baal made his students dream so much that they describe him as though they saw him in a dream. And this is the story they told:

After a long and weary day, the Baal Shem returned home and lay down for a much needed rest. No sooner had a deep sleep overtaken him than he was awakened by an angel who shook him and said, “Baal Shem, Baal Shem, wake up!” The tired rabbi opened his eyes, saw the angel, and said, “What is it you want?” They walked through darkness and mist and finally the Baal Shem said, “Where are we going?” And the angel said, “You will see.”

They came upon a clearing and the Baal Shem saw a man walking slowly on a circular path, his eyes seeing only the path beneath his feet. But the Baal Shem saw that on the inside of the circular ridge was a raging sea of blood – a sea of the most intense passions, loves, and fears. And on the outside of the ridge was the cold



blackness of nothing, the absence of the human. The Baal Shem tried to call out to the man, to warn him where he stood and where he walked, but the angel sealed the lips of the great teacher so that he could not speak.

Suddenly the scene was lit up by an almost blinding flash of light and the eyes of the man who slowly walked the path were opened. He saw for the first time the raging sea of blood on the one side and the empty nothingness on the other, and his face twisted in horror. He began to totter. The sea of blood licked up at his heels, pulling him into its midst, and the icy gnarled hands reached to pull him from his path into the darkness.

He was losing his balance, almost falling into the sea, almost being sucked into the emptiness. But just then the Baal Shem's lips were freed and he screamed out to the man, "Fly! You can fly!" And the man flew.

If I knew how, I would echo the words of the Baal Shem to educators everywhere. I would tell them – and their students – that they can fly. Far more important than the curiosity teachers might awaken, and far more vital, is the sense of wonder which young people can awaken in themselves, should they be given the opportunity to fly. Without a sense of wonder, there can be no true knowledge, there can be no genuine love, there can be no real humanity.

That which makes us human is not even our intelligence or our creativity. Modern schooling has taught us how to measure and to weigh, but not the meaning of wonder which can inspire us to do that measuring and weighing in the service of an idea. Life overwhelms us with dimensions and qualities of experience that defy analysis alone. No work of art, no system of philosophy, no theory of science has ever brought to expression the mysterious nature of reality or the value of freedom.

As Tagore writes:

Where words come out from the depth of truth  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit

We must all learn to comprehend. We must study the contributions of those who came before us. We must know enough to ask the right questions. We must appreciate the rigor of inquiry. Equally so, we must take note from Tagore about how "the stream of reason may not lose its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit." We forget, as Joseph Conrad wrote, that no illumination can sweep all mystery out of the world. We forget that we are encompassed by questions to which we can only respond in awe. Immanuel Kant painted a picture of a man who looked up at the infinite stars. Sensing his utter insignificance by comparison, he also realized that he was there, amongst stars, a testament to human dignity. His smallness, then, was his greatness.

The purpose of human beings, then, is to raise the sky. To create learning in the service of stars. In the words of the Baal Shem, we are all princes. Past success and failure, past achievements and setbacks, past all the trappings of institutionalism, education must be about mystery and striving, borne on a deep and abiding sense of wonder. In the end, education must allow us all to spread our wings and fly.

— **Dr. Fred Mednick**  
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Thank you for this critical and thought provoking analysis of Tagore's innovations in Shiksha. I am deeply moved by the care that Shilpa Jain has taken to integrate the whole body of Tagore's work in her analysis, including the poetry and plays. This truly is an area totally overlooked in most policy discourse on education.

The evolution of communities of thought as described in this paper resonated with experiences with several groups I have had the great pleasure to work with over the years. It is with some delight that I extend this response, which is offered in the context of first hand knowledge accumulated with several organizations that emerged in the United States during the 1970s. These include the New Alchemy Institute (NAI), Clamshell Alliance, and Women and Life on Earth (WLOE). These three organizations provide examples of ways that the ecology movement in the West drew upon the knowledge and wisdom of the East "as a challenge to the Enlightenment driven, anthropocentric view of the world." Beyond that, their histories mirror in essence that which has been described in this paper - that of evolution of thought vs. appropriation and preservation.

The New Alchemy Institute based its holistic scientific paradigm for food and energy production on an integration of ancient systems from the East and West, including Vedic principles and traditions as well as Chinese Taoist, and what is known about indigenous systems of the Americas. Clamshell Alliance teaches local activism in opposition to the construction of nuclear power plants based on Gandhian principles of non-violence. WLOE offers activist dialogue for critical feminist analysis of ecological activism based on feminine powers expressed in goddess cultures throughout the world. Like Tagore, each of these groups situated learning in a larger political, socio-cultural dynamic within a spirit and discipline of resistance and regeneration.

Of these three organizations, New Alchemy offers the clearest analogy to Tagore's philosophy of learning for several reasons. First, it considered each individual as teacher and learner at once; the vision at NAI was clear - a world that is free of planetary destruction. However, the path toward its manifestation through an ecosystem approach was a learning experience shared by all.

Second, situated on what had been a working farm, the gardens, pine forests, the lake, fields and meadows were all considered learning places. People came from all over the world to participate in informal sessions held every week as part of the Saturday garden workshops. In addition, apprenticeships offered unique learning experiences in a combination of subjects, including the integration biology, hydrology, wind mill design and construction, etc.

Third, the members of the NAI group were multi-disciplinary and multigenerational, embracing artists, farmers, philosophers, biologists, physicists, and activists spanning an age range from several months (including children of the members) to septuagenarians. Each person was considered of equal value (i.e., Ph.D. or non-diploma, female or male) which was reflected, for example, in the group decision making process as well as in wage and benefit policies.

### **Evolution vs. Appropriation/Preservation**

NAI was established in the 60's and reached a peak between 1974-78. During that time the Institute became widely recognized as a leading center for research and applications in ecologically sustainable development. The Institute received grants from foundations known for their support for cutting edge work such as Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, as well as grants from the National Science Foundation, and enjoyed a large public following as well. However, during a four-year period between 1979-1982 approximately, there was a change in leadership and there was a switch from innovative approaches to focusing on the business of development. With this switch, an emphasis was placed on marketing that which had been developed previously to reach a much broader audience - Mr. and Mrs. Front Porch, to quote the term often used. During this period the Institute struggled with difficulties that were very similar to those experienced at Santiniketan as described in Shilpa Jain's analysis. But, fortunately, there were no Nehru's to turn to for ongoing funding. I say "fortunately" because so much had been lost in a few short years that the center had lost its creative and innovative capabilities. Eventually, after a painful period, the center closed. However, two of the original members bought the land and it reemerged as Alchemy Farm, an ecological co-housing community that continues today and is an inspiration for those who look for ecologically sound ways of living on this planet.

Missing from the transition phase of NAI, as pointed out by Jain was the “collective vision building, leadership building, and leadership exercising processes based on continuous dialogue and reflection.” It is necessary for this to be a fundamental part of the group process from the beginning and throughout the life of the group. This is an essential part of every group’s learning process, but one that is most often overlooked. People become complacent with what is - and tend to rely on one or several people to fill a leadership position and when those people leave, a vacuum occurs. Both leaders and followers are complicit in this behavior and therefore it is extremely necessary to be vigilant about training new leaders in a way that incorporates the essential vision while allowing for evolution.

To this I would add another problem that emerges as a group grows larger. There is an economy of scale that can be easily diminished in a growth process. The NAI group was most highly creative and productive with 15-20 members. As the group grew larger, the creativity and efficiency was lost along with the vision. A management style emerged based on bottom line thinking. The process changed from an egalitarian process of consensus building to a hierarchical process of centralized leadership. We needed to develop management styles more consistent with democratic models that incorporate group learning in the process. The use of the word “management” would of course be antithetical to the original ideal of NAI as it refers to a form of control of people and resources. However, as a group grows it is even more important to have a system of governing principles firmly articulated in order to guard against appropriation and co-optation. This subject would be very interesting to explore in future issues.

This analysis along with the three others planned, including Gandhi, Aurobindo and Krishnamurti, will make a significant contribution to the sorely needed dialogue on the meaning of education in the rapidly changing field of international development.

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***“They seek not for hidden treasures,  
They know not how to cast nets”***

I will apologize to the reader in advance for the meager offering of these reflections. Having spent the past two years in utter dismay over the possibility for even small changes in local models of learning environments in the United States, let alone systemic transformation, I had stopped writing thesis-level prescriptions of Truth (as I used to do so passionately) and have found myself re-discovering my own learning. In that, I do mean my *learning* and not my knowledge base — it was my deeply hidden heart-knowing that gave me energy and impetus, but it was the *intellect* and *knowledge* that I brought to my arguments, or perhaps more accurately my awareness of its capability, that derailed me, and so that energy, filtered through my intellect, created for me much heat and very little light.

I used to have literally all the answers — if only everyone else would listen, we’d be so much better off! Now, I have an unfocused deeper knowing for myself, but the putting of words to it seems to threaten its continued birthing. As the observer alters and becomes enmeshed in the event in the quantum world, my wanting to “know” the answers threatens my needing to “be with” the questions. In such a state, my words may seem naive; if that is so, please forgive. I used to know Truth, and now I have reflections. I used to have (all) the answers, and now there are mostly questions. This of course sits painfully in the seat of my intellectual and culturally shallow “schooling”, a vestigial parasite that remains an occlusion to real vision.

In looking for a way out, I have stumbled across two bits of wisdom and insight. Rainer Rilke tells my brain “*be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart, and try to love the questions themselves,*” while Rabindranath Tagore speaks to my heart. In his words, from *Arogya*:

“Eyes closed like flowers, the time has come  
to immerse  
beneath deep meditation,  
external self.  
Peaceful fluid of constellations, where infinite sky  
keeps hidden the unformed essence of the day;  
there truth, to find itself, embarks  
toward the other shore of night.”

And so, finally to Rabindranath Tagore! Go back once more and read, slowly and gently his words above, and with the taste of sweet nectar on your lips, you will know what I hold to be most significant in his influence. It is his ability to “be” — to be in the moment, to be in reverence and awareness of the sacred in common things and experience, to be in love, that speaks to our hearts and shows us, as do the lives of children when at joyous play, wherein we may begin our work.

In 1912, the then quite famous and esteemed poet W.B. Yeats, writing to an undoubtedly eurocentric audience in his introduction to Tagore’s English translation of *Gitanjali*, says “*these lyrics... full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour... display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my live long,*” and “*just as we fight and make money and fill our heads with politics — all dull things in the doing — Mr. Tagore has been content to discover the soul, and surrender himself to its spontaneity.*” Lyricism, subtle rhythm, delicacies of color, spontaneity, the soul of the self — these are hues among the palette of learning that need be painted with if our children are to be the artists of their lives, if we are to have any hope for a world community capable of transformative growth and consciousness of interconnectedness. Sadly, fighting, politics and making money — all adult preoccupations in industrialized and post-industrialized cultures — are outgrowths in the children that we school to be so inclined.

The irony, of course, is that discovery and joy and play, integration of self into experience and heart-based connection to the sacred, are the essence of the child. It is schooling, the imposition of the adult mind and societal (and often cultural) coercion upon the spirits of children that cause the human race such grief and pain and sorrow -all dull things in the doing. If the grown-ups of the world could only just step back and stay out of the way at least, in time we could hold fast to the promise that a generation of beings, though possessed of the power to destroy, could be in reverence of beauty and love and discovery, and would choose a more sacred path

together. Tagore has cracked open that gate to the garden for us, so we may peek through and be nurtured by its vision, but most individual adults, most societies, and most nations seem to fear the beauty within.

It is exactly that *fear*, fear of loss of control and power and material well-being, which leads to entrenchment and envy at all levels of existence, and which feeds the age-old need for a dominator based world, the need for caste and socioeconomic differentiation, for prejudice and racial and ethnic and religious discrimination, for ecological and species exploitation, for war, for the creation of the Nation and the impositional schooling of nationalism, of competition and comparison upon our children. In his essays and speeches outside the realm of poetry, Tagore spoke of the need to move beyond the Nation, that destructive aspect of cultural identity that created the state for the imposition of power over others. His words do not tell me that he intended the abdication of his country, the renunciation of what it is to be *Indian*, nor even the viability of the state per se, but rather the rejection of fear. Fear that would take his people toward a soul-less Western value system as an adaptive strategy. Fear that would lead them to sustain the hierarchical and differential valuing of human beings that was culturally entrenched. Fear that would always and forever occlude the ability of each person and the Nation itself, to hold fast to the sacredness of being, to create a society and culture in which joy and reverence and, finally, love, prevails. This love that is the essence of being an experientially engaged child (and the essential aspect of Tagore's poetic vision). This is where, for me, Rabindranath Tagore's poetry intersects most saliently with his systemic critiques — in the nurturant, expectant and synergistic power of love — and it is where I find a path to the future of education for our children around the world. I have worked for years with teen-aged people and adults who, by virtue of their schooling, their egos, their unrealized spirituality, the need to compare and differentially value, live in fear. This fear is always and inevitably destructive and self-feeding, and I talk with them about it, hoping they will see. I ask them, "what is the opposite of fear?" and they always tell me "courage" or "bravery" or "self-defense" or "power". And I tell them that *love is the opposite of fear, for what is love if not the unfolding of possibility?*

So for me, love is the essential element, the underlying generative force in the creation of a healthy learning environment, the unfolding of the possibility in each child. It is a thing we can nurture simply, very often, by not *teaching against it* in young children, though our message will be in contrast to the Truth that the culture may impose. Krishnamurti tells us "*without love the acquisition of knowledge only increase confusion and leads to self-destruction*" — is this not a most common experience for all of us whom work with children who have been "schooled" in the hierarchical, industrial model? In these older children, for whom comparison and competitiveness have been both an aspect of their experience and typically the model surrounding them, this essence must be re-discovered through a learning culture that encourages and supports self-discovery, personal creation of value and meaning, collaborative experience and simple joy in beauty and creativity and discovery. Again, Krishnamurti: "*one is everlastingly comparing oneself with another, with what one is and what one should be, with someone who is more fortunate. This comparison really kills. Comparison is degrading; it perverts one's outlook. On this comparison one is brought up. All our education is based on it and so is our culture. So there is everlasting struggle to be something other than what one is. The understanding of what one is uncovers creativeness, but comparison breeds competitiveness and ruthless ambition, which we think brings about progress. Progress has only led so far to more ruthless wars and misery than the world has ever known. To bring up children without comparison is true education.*"

And so, we now perhaps begin to build a pedagogy of values upon which nurturant learning environments can be built. A foundation of love. No comparisons and competition. To these I would add no coercion or pre-emptive answers, or as Paul Tillich so clearly puts it, "*the fatal pedagogical error is to throw answers, like stones, at the heads of those whom have yet to ask the questions.*" This pedagogy of values is one of the most critical aspects of the work to be done as we go on down the road in creating new learning possibilities for children, and in this arena I truly commend the work and proffered resources of Shikshantar — it is to them that I turn these days when I am looking for a reinvigoration of my mind and of my spirit. Shikshantar has grown to become a clear beacon for thought in this work.

What we all speak of at this point in the work is holism, and though many variations of the holistic vision have been developed and shared over the course of time, most share some common values and themes. For me, perhaps the most succinct and motivating call-to-values I have read comes from the group Global Alliance for Transforming Education (GATE), a group that remains operative through its parent organization, the Holistic

Education Network of Tasmania, out of Australia. I share this document here as substitute for my own vision, as a resource for thought, and offer it as a discussion base for future work.

*Excerpts from Education 2000: A Holistic Perspective*

There is no copyright on this document. The Global Alliance for Transforming Education (GATE) offers it to the world as a new foundation for education.

We are educators, parents, and citizens from diverse backgrounds and educational movements who share a common concern for the future of humanity and all life on Earth. We believe that the serious problems affecting modern educational systems reflect a deeper crisis in our culture: the inability of the predominant industrial/technological worldview to address, in a humane and life-affirming manner, the social and planetary challenges that we face today.

We believe that our dominant cultural values and practices, including emphasis on competition over cooperation, consumption over sustainable resource use, and bureaucracy over authentic human interaction have been destructive to the health of the ecosystem and to optimal human development as well.

As we examine this culture-in-crisis, we also see that our systems of education are anachronistic and dysfunctional. In sharp contrast to the conventional use of the word education, we believe that our culture must restore the original meaning of the word, which is "to draw forth." In this context, education means caring enough to draw forth the greatness that is within each unique person.

The purpose of this Statement is to proclaim an alternative vision of education — one which is a life-affirming and democratic response to the challenges of the 1990's and beyond. Because we value diversity and encourage a wide variety of methods, applications and practices, it is a vision toward which educators may strive in their various ways. There is not complete unanimity, even among those of us who endorse this document, on all of the statements presented here. The vision transcends our differences and points us in a direction that offers a humane resolution to the crisis of modern education.

**Principle I. Educating for Human Development**

We assert that the primary — indeed the fundamental — purpose of education is to nourish the inherent possibilities of human development. Schools must be places that facilitate the learning and whole development of all learners. Learning must involve the enrichment and deepening of relationships to self, to family and community members, to the global community, to the planet, and to the cosmos...

We call for a renewed recognition of human values which have been eroded in modern culture — harmony, peace, cooperation, community, honesty, justice, equality, compassion, understanding and love. The human being is more complex, more whole, than his or her roles as worker or citizen. If a nation — through its schools, its child welfare policies, and its competitiveness - fails to nurture self-understanding, emotional health, and democratic values, then ultimately economic success will be undermined by a moral collapse of society...

**Principle II. Honouring Students as Individuals**

We call for each learner — young and old — to be recognized as unique and valuable. This means welcoming personal differences and fostering in each student a sense of tolerance, respect and appreciation for human diversity. Each individual is inherently creative, has unique physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs and abilities, and possesses an unlimited capacity to learn...

We call for a thorough rethinking of grading, assessment, and standardized examinations... Besides neglecting important dimensions of all learners, standardized tests also serve to eliminate those who cannot be standardized...

We call for an expanded application of the tremendous knowledge we now have about learning styles, multiple intelligences, and the psychological bases of learning. There is no longer any excuse to impose learning tasks, methods, and materials en masse when we know that any group of students will need to learn in different ways, through different strategies and activities...

We question the value of educational categories such as "gifted," "learning disabled," and "at-risk." Students of all ages differ greatly across a full spectrum of abilities, talents, inclinations, and backgrounds. Assigning these labels does not describe a learner's personal potentials; it simply defines one in relation to the arbitrary expectations of the system...

### **Principle III. The Central Role of Experience**

We affirm what the most perceptive educators have argued for centuries: education is a matter of experience. Learning is an active, multisensory engagement between an individual and the world, a mutual contact that empowers the learner and reveals the rich meaningfulness of the world. Experience is dynamic and ever growing. The goal of education must be to nurture natural, healthy growth through experience, and not to present a limited, fragmented, predigested “curriculum” as the path to knowledge and wisdom...

### **Principle IV. Holistic Education**

We call for wholeness in the educational process and for the transformation of educational institutions and policies required to attain this aim. Wholeness implies that each academic discipline provides merely a different perspective on the rich, complex, integrated phenomenon of life. Holistic education celebrates and makes constructive use of evolving, alternate views of reality and multiple ways of knowing. It is not only the intellectual and vocational aspects of human development that need guidance and nurturance, but also the physical, social, moral, aesthetic, creative, and — in a nonsectarian sense — spiritual aspects. Holistic education takes into account the numinous mystery of life and the universe in addition to the experiential reality...

### **Principle V. New Role of Educators**

We call for a new understanding of the role of the teacher. We believe that teaching is essentially a vocation or calling, requiring a blend of artistic sensitivity and scientifically grounded practice. Many of today’s educators have become caught in the trappings of competitive professionalism: tightly controlled credentials and certification, jargon and special techniques, and a professional aloofness from the spiritual, moral and emotional issues inevitably involved in the process of human growth.

We hold, rather, that educators ought to be facilitators of learning, which is an organic, natural process and not a product that can be turned out on demand...

We call for new models of teacher education which include the cultivation of the educator’s own inner growth and creative awakening. When educators are open to their own inner being, they invite a co-learning, co-creating process with the learner. In this process, the teacher is learner, the learner is teacher. What teaching requires is an exquisite sensitivity to the challenges of human development, not a pre-packaged kit of methods and materials...

### **Principle VI. Freedom of Choice**

We call for meaningful opportunities for real choice at every stage of the learning process. Genuine education can only take place in an atmosphere of freedom. Freedoms of inquiry, of expression, and of personal growth are all required. In general, students should be allowed authentic choices in their learning. They should have a significant voice in determining the curriculum and disciplinary procedures, according to their ability to assume such responsibility...

### **Principle VII. Educating for a Participatory Democracy**

We call for a truly democratic model of education to empower all citizens to participate in meaningful ways in the life of the community and the planet. The building of a truly democratic society means far more than allowing people to vote for their leaders — it means empowering individuals to take an active part in the affairs of their community. A truly democratic society is more than the “rule of the majority” — it is a community in which disparate voices are heard and genuine human concerns are addressed. It is a society open to constructive change when social or cultural change is required.

In order to maintain such a community, a society must be grounded in a spirit of empathy on the part of its citizens — a willingness to understand and experience compassion for the needs of others. There must be recognition of the common human needs that bind people together into neighbourhoods, nations, and the planetary community. Out of this recognition there must be a concern for justice...

### **Principle VIII. Educating for Global Citizenship**

We believe that each of us — whether we realize it or not — is a global citizen. Human experience is vastly wider than any single culture’s values or ways of thinking. In the emerging global community, we are being brought into contact with diverse cultures and worldviews as never before in history.

We believe that it is time for education to nurture an appreciation for the magnificent diversity of human experience, and for the lost or still uncharted potentials within human beings. Education in a global age needs to address what is most fully, most universally human in the young generation of all cultures...

Global education reminds us that all education and all human activity needs to rest on principles that govern successful ecological systems. These principles include the usefulness of diversity, the value of cooperation and balance, the needs and rights of participants, and the need for sustainability within the system...

### **Principle IX. Educating for Earth Literacy**

We believe that education must spring organically from a profound reverence for life in all its forms. We must rekindle a relationship between the human and the natural world that is nurturing, not exploitative. This is at the very core of our vision for the twenty-first century...

Economic, social, and political institutions must engender a deep respect for this interdependence. All must recognize the imperative need for global cooperation and ecological sensitivity, if humankind is to survive on this planet. Our children require a healthy planet on which to live and learn and grow. They need pure air and water and sunlight and fruitful soil and all the other living forms that comprise Earth's ecosystem. A sick planet does not support healthy children...

### **Principle X. Spirituality and Education**

We believe that all people are spiritual beings in human form who express their individuality through their talents, abilities, intuition and intelligence. Just as the individual develops physically, emotionally and intellectually, each person also develops spiritually.

Spiritual experience and development manifest as a deep connection to self and others, a sense of meaning and purpose in daily life, an experience of the wholeness and interdependence of life, a respite from the frenetic activity, pressure and overstimulation of contemporary life, the fullness of creative experience, and a profound respect for the numinous mystery of life. The most important, most valuable part of the person is his or her inner, subjective life — the self or the soul...

We believe that education must nourish the healthy growth of the spiritual life, not do violence to it through constant evaluation and competition. One of the functions of education is to help individuals become aware of the connectedness of all life. Fundamental to this awareness of wholeness and connectedness is the ethic expressed in all of the world's great traditions: "What I do to others I do to myself."

Equally fundamental to the concept of connectedness is the empowerment of the individual. If everyone is connected to everyone and everything else, then the individual can and does make a difference.

By fostering a deep sense of connection to others and to the Earth in all its dimensions, holistic education encourages a sense of responsibility to self, to others and to the planet. We believe that this responsibility is not a burden, but rather arises out of a sense of connection and empowerment. Individual, group and global responsibility is developed by fostering the compassion that causes individuals to want to alleviate the suffering of others, by instilling the conviction that change is possible and by offering the tools to make those changes possible.

So now we have the cumulative vision, a vision put forth so well by GATE, so eloquently by Shikshantar, so often. But the big question remains, how can the vision, its essence so informed, supported and illuminated by Tagore, be made significant? How can holism truly impact learning environments on a large scale? This is indeed a most important question, for without its realization, we will continue as education activists to rage against an insurmountable edifice so rigid in its intellectual and practical homeostasis as to render our work insignificant.

I really have no answers for this most important of questions. Regardless of the immense amount of energy and spirit put to this movement for our global children, there remains an apparent lack of societal critical consciousness and practical effectiveness, to a degree that is often disheartening. Several key aspects seem to jump out at me upon which some focus may be placed. These are characteristics of what we do as education activists, or of the movements and institutions we create and commit our lives to, that seem to have created difficulty in significant manifestation of macroscale change. These characteristics are the nature of marginality, extra-referentiality, a lack of effective macro-communication and the need for an evolving global mythos or narrative of experience, and the very nature of creating systemic change toward a learning culture that is once globally coherent and locally empathetic and tuned.

Marginality is the term I use to refer to the status of almost all holistic learning "experiments" - the actual places of learning themselves and the people involved therein. That they so often are couched in the terminology of "experimentation", even after thirty or forty or more years of action, is problematic. The bigger problem, however,



is that these explorations into new ways of creating healthy human development and learning most typically happen at the edges. In the U.S., children of these schools are often those who cannot navigate the traditional school system - those who have a reputation for being “failures” when viewed through the lens of standard culture (this too I have encountered anecdotally from the experience of Japanese students and families where the cultural norm is even more rigidly pronounced). These children are often “drop-outs” or “socially maladjusted” or “angry” or any other number of negative description, according to the local culture, yet I know them from experience to be deeply explorative, creative and engaged (if properly motivated) youth whom are troubled by the very real sense they have that something is not right in the world in which they live. Across the range of alternative schools in the U.S., many of the children are seeking a new and better way against all odds, and being criticized in the process.

Regardless of the rich diversity of local innovations pursued in new ways of learning and schooling, a very small minority of humans are exploring these possibilities and those that do so are typically not economically well-off (having come from families where ideas are more important than wealth), are socially progressive to the point of being insignificant in our industrialized world of materialism, competition and social dis-integration, and whose efforts to maintain some stand against the degradation of the cultural norm takes all possible use of time, to the point where those who are doing the local work simply do not have the time to do the regional, national and transnational work.

I know of holistic schools in Poland that are marginalized because they educe spirit and learning for its value for development as humans rather than as a way of gaining tools for moving out of socialism. I know of a wonderful place in Thailand, perhaps one of the most completely affirming and effective concrete example of our new vision of learning that works, as far as I can discern, because the children who are served are orphans and outcasts, and are thus not valued intrinsically by society. I know of school in African villages that seek integrated learning and can seek exactly because they are an “unimportant” group of people. There are so many stories of learning environments that are marginalized in the power hierarchy. Small villages can indeed do this work. Tiny towns and groups of like minded minority thinkers can do this work. All, I have a sense, because they are not “important”, do not represent a real threat or significance to the ruling mind-set. This is not to imply that the lives that are enriched and illuminated, the potentials unfolded, the love created, is not real and of transformative power for those involved, simply that the normalizing forces of society do not bear heavily on these outposts because of the very fact that they remain marginal in the macrocosm.

Under the pressure to “make it” somehow as a place, an institution or an organizing body creating new environments and contexts for learning, I have found that almost universally we seek to define ourselves in reference to the other. So, for instance, in the United States, we have “alternative schools”. Globally, the philosophers of our movement offer antidotes to factory schooling. We seek, at one level or another, to compete with the prevailing system and to offer a better truth. This extra-referentiality is a poison in that, by defining our essence *in contrast to the other*, we create an intrinsic *reliance on the other* for our worth. In existing as a remedy to the disease, we remain reliant upon the disease itself. The question for me, then, is can we create a body of language and meaning, a narrative of strength and purpose, that promotes to the mass culture the value to be had without the focus on the other. Can we create a sense of the need for self-determination that simply refuses to acknowledge the import of the dominant hierarchy and seeks to develop a spirit of self-definition not in defiance but in self-creation?

An additional aspect of extra-referentiality that is critically important speaks to the failed schools. I have worked in a place that I feel to be critically compromised in that it acts as an holistic alternative yet virtually requires (not in philosophy but in practice) the validation of the children’s growth according to state standards and credits, offering diplomas and certifications and extra-referential validation. This, regardless of the languaging and efforts of some people, creates the sense of being a healthier version of the system itself, and generates within the children and the parents a decisive lack of true self-empowerment and determinism. My sense is that if this extra-referential validation potential was to be withdrawn (by opting out of the standard model completely), the school would likely dissolve through lack of support by parents. So, in seeking to at least partially accommodate the requirements of parents and the state, the institution sells its spiritual potential to dominators, and prostitutes its higher calling. This is the sense I got when reading about Santinitekan, and it is a story I have heard time and again about schools that attempt to integrate into the current system in an attempt to extra-referentially solicit

“validation”, support or societal acceptance. There must be another approach, and it is critical to the movement that we discover that path.

It seems to me that in many ways we face an enormous problem in implementation at a state and international level. Perhaps the finest work I have read about the poise of our culture toward creating new possibilities for real systemic change is the document entitled Transnational Advocacy, Global Civil Society? Emerging Evidence from the Field of Education (by Lynn Murphy, available on <[www.swaraj.org/shikshantar](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar)>). In this, we are offered vibrant evidence for possible changes toward the “tipping point” of societal change, and it is indeed a document that all should read, and read once more. Yet, this change is within groups and among advocates who are thinking along the lines of this need. The question really is how do we get those single individual power-holders that decide where, or if, or in what context their own children will learn and grow, to realize the need, the essential requirement for their own children, and humanity itself, to work toward transformation. How can we connect value of the spirit in an effective way to people who define the world through spiritually de-valued ways? Einstein once said, “*the significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them*”. How can we, then, as education activists, convince one person at a time, and simultaneously on a macroscopic scale the culture in which we find ourselves, of *ayam atman brahman*? Where is this thinking that is outside the premises of prevailing societal values, is not defined in response to those values, which takes the movement from the margin and into the mainstream, and yet does not set itself upon a similar systemic set of principles that by their nature will become ossified or limiting? *This* is an area where we will need some thinking, discussion and work, I believe.

Finally, I think we need to address the issue of effective communication and the creation of a cumulative narrative that supports our underlying ethos. Shikshantar does incredible work, yet does not know what happens, at the core, in the U.S. with the NCACS, nor the NCACS with IDEC or UNESCO or ICEA or local groups or small pods of workers or single institutions or school or community learning environments in Africa and Thailand and Japan and Russia and everywhere else where this slow evolution is happening. To find each other, to share our stories — even without the impetus to integrate them all into one Truth, perhaps especially without said impetus, to compare our work and see what local solutions and trial and success have created, to open real-time communication and perhaps even more important, innovations in collaboration between the children of our movement, will begin the critically important task of gathering the narrative, validating the work, and developing the mythos of our compelling ethos. We are both not yet what we can be nor as small as we may think, and the ingathering of this global evolution, as evinced by the narrative of daily steps and thoughts and action of our children, our philosophers, our systems-changers, our teachers, our parents and our organizations will serve well to give us more strength, more sense of purpose and more opportunity for collaborative synergism in our work.

Will it happen? I think so. We will need to find a way to create without destroying, and we will need to continue to hold faith in our hearts for this thing that we have not yet seen flourish. Rabindranath Tagore speaks to the need for loving creation in saying “*you turn a tree into firewood and it will be able to burn for you, but no longer will it produce neither flowers nor fruits*”, and Gandhi tell us “*to believe that what has not occurred in history will not occur at all is to argue disbelief in the dignity of man.*” We must continue to hold fast to human dignity, to strive, to share our stories and to hold love so very strongly in our hearts. For what is love if not the unfolding of possibility?

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## Rabindranath Tagore's Philosophy and Its Lessons for Modern Education

In Shilpa Jain's thoughtful and thorough discussion of Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy on learning and the evolution of Santiniketan (2000), he poses the following question: what can we learn from Tagore today, 60 years after his death? As an educator devoted to improving the experience of poor children who have had no other option but to attend modern, conventional schools, I must ask myself that, given Tagore's opposition to these institutions, do schools have nothing to learn from the esteemed Bengali's scholar's insights into the nature of learning? Should his lessons be restricted to alternative learning spaces to remain pure to his original vision? Would incorporating Tagore's beliefs in conventional schools make a caricature of his whole philosophy?

While I agree with Tagore's razor-sharp critique of modern schooling, and deeply admire his unremitting commitment to uncovering the infinite potential for love and freedom in every human being, I believe that we must not forsake the experience of millions of children around the world who attend modern schools. While alternative learning spaces such as Santiniketan (in its early years) should be created and re-created around the world, each adapted to the local culture and ecosystem, those of us who have decided to work from within the 'system' are entitled to use any life-enriching philosophy that promises to improve the educational experience of children. Granted, given the average educational institution's obsession with examinations, classroom-based lessons, lifeless mechanical routines, pervasive passivity, and lack of physical and spiritual freedom, the possibilities for widespread transformation are severely curtailed, if not altogether unattainable. And yet, when I ask graduates what were their most treasured moments while at school, they mention the rare field trip to a nearby river, the chair they made in carpentry, the poem they recited to the whole school, the good times spent with friends, the day they decided to strike in solidarity with teachers for better salaries...moments that brought them closer to nature, that honed their manual skills, that made art alive, that helped them gain self-respect for helping others. These are the moments that must be replicated again and again in conventional schools.

Learning, for Tagore, had four main purposes: (a) achieving unity with truth, which seeks to integrate the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual domains; (b) integrating oneself into harmony with all existence, which promotes an understanding of the interdependence among all living beings; (c) acquiring fullness in personality, which advocates self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-respect both at the individual and community level; and finally (d) freeing the soul, which Tagore emphasized the most and that he believed was essential for fostering love and wisdom (Jain 2000: 19). One of the main ways in which these purposes have been thwarted in modern schools has been by severing a sense of connectedness that children naturally feel towards other people and the environment. Recovering this sense of attachment thus emerges as a primary cultural task for schools.

One useful strategy that derives from Tagore's vision is to use the functioning of ecosystems as a metaphor for how communities and schools ought to operate. This way, children learn about their place and about the biological and cultural interdependencies that sustain human and non-human life alike. To know one's place is to have an intimate knowledge of the locality and the surrounding natural habitat. Reflection in the classroom should be completely intertwined with children's participation in school and community projects that help nurture culturally significant relationships among peers, and between young and old. At the elementary level, gardening emerges as a refreshing participatory approach. As Thomas Berry wrote,

"Gardening is an active participation in the deepest mysteries of the universe. By gardening, our children learn that they constitute, with all growing things, a single community of life. They learn to nurture and be nurtured in a universe that is always precarious, but ultimately benign" (1989: 3).

Tending a garden reinforces basic qualities such as responsibility and maturity because children learn on a first hand basis that plants need adequate water, sunlight, and soil to survive. It also involves children in an ongoing study of the cyclical process of birth, growth, decay, and re-birth of life. Over the long run, children feel useful and instills in them ecologically sensitive values and skills.

To foster a spirit of place in the upper elementary and secondary grades, a series of questions can be addressed to help students focus on ecological and community concerns. Are local natural areas (rivers, lakes, mountains, forests) being protected from urban growth and industrial encroachment? Where does the water, electricity, food, building materials, and other elements come from? Was the food grown organically and did the workers receive a

fair wage? Was the timber used for the chairs and desks grown sustainably? What mechanisms exist to patronize producers who engage in socially and environmentally benign practices? Where does the garbage and organic waste go after it leaves the school compounds? If the answers to these questions are coupled with political action to ensure ecological and social rejuvenation, then students will be in a stronger position to defend their community against external and internal negative forces. Students will only come to know the world and seek to protect it if they are allowed to immerse themselves in it, with their whole body and soul. Children cannot study the forest from afar; they have to walk, sing, eat, meditate, laugh, and sleep in the midst of it. Even better if they walk barefooted, as Tagore suggested, for feet are the limbs the best adapted “for intimately knowing the earth by their touch” (1923: 119). Otherwise, the forest becomes an inert abstraction for which the child feels no connection.

As it pertains to Tagore’s quest to humanize technology and the relationship of humans with it, students in upper grades can begin to wrestle with the impact of rapid technological change in society (Hutchison 1998: 132). Notions of place, which for centuries have been grounded in the physical experiences of local communities, now face serious challenges as television, video games, and the Internet occupy a larger and larger horizon in the lives of children. Virtual places and images are replacing the first-hand experience so necessary to feel a sense of connectedness with physical places. The long-term impact of these technological changes on the notion of self and community are still being worked out, but it is clear that if schools head blindly into the technological discourse (as they have been doing in industrialized countries), they will be unable to seriously engage the psychological and sociocultural consequences of these rapid technological shifts.

Another aspect of Tagore’s vision of learning highlights the role that art plays in liberating the soul and connecting the individual with the community. Tagore saw art as a human expression that should combine utility and sentiment. Just as food should combine nutrition and flavor, so should art unite truth with beauty. “The true principle of art is the principle of unity,” wrote Tagore. “This is the reason why poetry tries to select words that have vital qualities—words that are not for mere information, but have become naturalized in our hearts” (1923: 20). Tagorean art sought to exalt the individual in the context of a larger human community. Not just art for art’s sake, but art contextually rooted in a given culture that nurtures the bonds between community members. Suzi Gablik who wrote that art should invite dynamic participation, not anonymous and passive spectatorship typical of modern art (1991: 151), supports this view. While the modern ideal of art separates the audience, the creator, and the object, a human-oriented ecological view brings them together into one single whole. Based on these ideas, it is possible to replace in schools the modern ideal of individual, autonomous creativity for one that sustains a moral universe. Furthermore, art in modern schools is viewed as dispensable, as a mere appendage that can be extirpated when needed. In Tagore’s vision, art is an indissoluble part of being human, an expression of its most deeply felt emotions. As such, schools should encourage the creation of spaces for the sharing of dances, feasts, drawings, songs, sculptures, poems, drama, communal ceremonies that bring school members together in ways that are enjoyable and truthful to all.

One last element that I will mention of the Tagorean vision of learning is the need to unify the intellectual, physical, and spiritual domains. Modern schools only tap onto the first domain, filling children’s minds with facts and information, completely disregarding the latter two. The disassociation of these areas fosters individuals who are not able to have a holistic view of life. Rather, they have a fragmented understanding that privileges ‘mental’ work over the no less important ‘manual’ work. In modern schools, manual work falls under the rubric of ‘vocational education’ and is usually relegated for poor and academically under-achieving students. This misconception of the value of work prepares uni-dimensional students that are unable to engage in the most basic tasks that individuals in past generations were able to do with relative ease. Gardening is an initial endeavor to bring about the unity of the three domains, but it must be strengthened by many other skills and work. Masonry, carpentry, weaving, sewing, cooking, pottery, cleaning, husbandry, horticulture are just a few other activities for which schools should prepare children and adolescents. These activities allow students to work with wood, clay, soil, water, wool, and stone, elements that have an eternal quality to them and that work at a subconscious level to support children’s association with nature. These activities allow them to feel self-reliant and be socially useful. Finally, these activities bring dignity to forms of work that go back in time to the evolution of human life itself.

In the above discussion, I have included only some of the elements of Tagorean philosophy. I use 'some' purposefully partly because I have not addressed basic elements of Tagorean philosophy (e.g., the importance of simplicity in one's life) and partly because one cannot introduce elements of Tagorean view on life into formal conventional schools without doing harm to the philosophy as a whole. Tagore was vehement in his attacks on schools since he saw them as places that robbed away the soul of children. In his characteristic style of writing, Tagore likened schools to "the shoes of a Mandarin woman [that] pinched and bruised [children's] nature on all sides and at all times" (1923: 115). He was correct in his condemnation, but I am convinced that many basic aspects of schools can be transformed and improved. While I believe it is imperative to incorporate elements of Tagorean philosophy to humanize contemporary schools, I harbor no hopes that a radical transformation of the individual or society will occur as a result. As a modern institution more concerned with transmitting occupational and technological skills and so-called higher mental abilities, freeing the child's soul is the last of its concerns. Santiniketan, which evolved from a place where the individual and community were constantly being regenerated to a place where "the spirits of interdependence, mutual learning, freedom and creation have nearly completely disappeared" (Jain 2000: 29), is witness to these pressures. Nonetheless, an effort must be made. At the current pace of educational expansion, most children worldwide will be exposed to formal education at least five to six years during their lifetime. Given this reality, I believe that we should at least attempt to alter the lifeless and stupefying education that millions of children receive and that Tagore himself had to endure. Otherwise, we would ensure that only those few fortunate enough to be in alternative learning spaces receive guidance that truly harmonizes life with all existence.

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Shilpa Jain's study of Tagore prompted me to read some poems by Tagore, about whom I knew little. Tagore's work, and accounts of the plays he and others would mount at Santiniketan, led me to respond to Shilpa's study in the form of a skit.

### Poets and Societal Learning

Setting: A one room apartment, with kitchen area to the left, couch in the center, bed at the right, bookshelves everywhere. A young man lies on the couch reading a book of selected works by Rabindranath Tagore. The man's pregnant wife is at the table in the kitchen area, paying bills and preparing lesson plans.

From offstage, left, high Young Voices singing the beginning of India's anthem, based on Tagore's poem "Janogano mano adhinayaka/Jaya he Bharata Bhagya Bhidhata ("Oh leader of the mind of the people, victory be to you, Lord of the fate of India!")

He, taking off his glasses: Poets "are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"!

She: Shelley's silly. Do you really want romantics in charge?

He: Perhaps not in charge. But charging, adding voltage to the current.

She: That's not making laws.

He: Laws are shared rules. Poets prepare the way by creating shared dreams, the kinds expressed in Tagore's anthems, poems, and stories. Legislation is only a final phase of societal learning.

She: I still don't get what you mean by "societal learning."

He: It's a change in the set of lessons shared by a society to better fit environing reality. An individual can add a lesson to her individual lesson-set, but until large numbers of individuals share that new lesson, the learning is still at the level of individuals. That level is only transcended when something supra-individual changes, the shared lesson-set.

She: Why are shared lessons "supra-individual"?

He: They take on a life of their own, perpetuating themselves, enculturating the young to the shared lesson set's ways of seeing the world, channeling the way individuals act, think, and learn.

She: Well, maybe. And maybe I am largely channeled by what you call the shared lesson set, but I still think my own thoughts.

He: I've noticed.

She: And I can question those shared lessons, can ask if they fit the lessons my own experience has taught me.

He: That's right. There is a dialectic between individual learners and the collective lesson set. The dialect is continual because the realities of each learner's experience varies in time and space, requiring that the shared lesson set be adjusted to the changing environing realities.

She: How does the shared lesson set get changed?

He: An individual learner must convince fellow learners of the merit of the new lesson, especially the leaders in the area of concern addressed by the lesson.

She, licking an envelope: You're so abstract!

He, getting up from couch: Think of societal learning as composed of four parts: First, an individual learner, someone like me trying to make sense of his reality. Second, a network of learners who share the individual learner's interest, people like you and others [sweeping his arm toward the audience]. Third, the environing realities surrounding us, including the physical reality [sweeping his arm to the floor and walls] and the unseen

but felt reality of the spirit [wiggles fingers around his head]. Fourth, [waving left and right hands back and forth between him, her, and the audience] there is the supra-individual shared lesson set that orders how learners in a society act, think, and learn, in a way that provides some measure of satisfaction in their interactions with the environment. There is a continual interplay between the learner, learners' net, collective learning set, and enviroing realities.

She: And how do poets like Tagore fit into all this?

He: They foster societal learning, in many ways. They are critics of society's lesson set. They are early sensors of the dissatisfying dissonances between the collective lesson set and enviroing reality. They feel the dissonance bodily. Billions of agitated neurons moan for coherence, like an orchestra whimpering for its beginning "E," until the nerves find some harmony, some coherent resolution in a poem.

She: And when they find coherence?

He: Other learners hear it, and have a similar bodily relief. That's why music was so important to Tagore, the best way for bodies to feel the harmonies he found.

Offstage, two lines of Tagore's music. Then, Voices,: "I touch God in my song as the hill touches the far-away sea with its waterfall."

She: That's beautiful!

He, sitting: Tagore reconnects us for a moment to the aspect of our environment that is invisible but real. He wanted humans to "find, feel, and represent in all their creative work the Eternal, the Creator." This is especially important in an age whose lesson set reduces all reality to material alone.

She: Are you knocking what science and technology and science do?

He: No. They are success stories in collective learning, vastly expanding the range of the shared lesson set's fit with material reality. But one cost of the techno-corporate structure is that each learner is pigeon-holed into learning about only a tiny, specialized part of reality. We have six billion busy brains, but only haphazard integration of what they learn, billions of learners of the parts, but few learners of the whole. If societal learning is to be more than just smart, if it is to be wise, it must foster an appreciation for the whole. The poetic imagination is one way to regain a sense of the whole.

She: How do poems do that?

He, picking up his book: Through the fusing of resemblances. Tagore's sick-bed rose is like the unfolding universe. "Gano" is like "mano." The rhythm's mood is like the heart's. Poets, like Blake, help us "to see a world in a grain of sand/ and a heaven in a wild flower/ hold infinity in the palm of your hand/ and eternity in an hour."

She: The words sound nice, but society is composed of busy people honking in the street. Their "lesson set" is a vast, complex jangle of perceptions.

He: Yes, and within the complex network of lessons, the poet sometimes sees which ones are most central, which capture the essence of a civilization, which make the parts into a whole. Tagore helps do that for India. And for the world.

She: Sounds like too much to expect of one person.

Adult Voice, offstage, center: "I am the poet of the earth. I strive that all its sounds shall seek expression in my flute, and yet there are many gaps. many notes have failed to find their way to this music making. . . . Poets from many lands pour their songs into Nature's symphonic stream. . . . I live in a small corner of the parapet of prestige. . . . I wait for the message of the poet who is close to the soil. . . . Come, poet of the mute, obscure men, give voice to their hidden sorrow, fill with life and joy this dry, songless land, release the spring hidden in its heart."

He: The well springs of poetry, in the largest sense of the word, are in everyone. They just need to be tapped. And those springs are the source of the streams that flow into the river of societal learning. But schooling too often desiccates the truly poetic impulses.

She, pointing to her shelf of children's books: Come off it. I have the kids read wonderful poems and stories. I encourage my third graders to find poems in colors and songs in smells. You saw the things the kids wrote.

He: They were wonderful.

She: The kids pay great attention to the details of their worlds, with surprising insight.

He: All those learners' observations, when summed, are the basis for societal learning that is alive and real.

She: And you talk about "wholes." Well, I've fought to use "whole language" with our schools' kids, so they learn to read for meaning, not just to decode the parts.

He: But isn't there a backlash, a back-to-basics stress on phonics only?

She: Yes. But research shows that whole-language kids not only decode just as well as others, they read more. They love to read because a story or a poem taken whole gives meaning.

He: Any school has a tacit curriculum. In some, children learn that it's the parts that matter. In others, children learn to look for meaning in the whole. And I worry that the former are gaining ground. They might do OK in producing kids with "skills," but will not foster the habit of making sense of the whole. The societal lesson set will value smarts for the parts, not questing for wisdom.

She: It will get worse in systems that are increasing pressure to use standardized tests. When principals are under pressure to get the results needed for funding, they will pressure teachers to teach to the test. And the tests don't measure metaphor, index insight, or bell-curve wisdom.

He: It depresses me.

Young and Adult Voices, offstage, center: "Where the mind is without fear and the head held high;/ Where knowledge is free;/ Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;/ where words come out from the depth of truth;/ . . . Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action - -;/ Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."

He: Where will we find that heaven of freedom?

She: I still think school reform is possible.

He: It hasn't gotten far in most places it's been tried.

She: Unfortunately true.

He: And look at what happened to Rabindranath's Santiniketan. A poem morphed into bureaucracy.

She: What happened?

He: Societal forgetting. From the body of Tagore's vision, some bones, skin and teeth remain; the rest has been forgotten, the body does not breathe.

She, ripping a check for utilities from her checkbook: Poetry has less pull than rupees.

Adult Voice: "The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day."

He, standing: I admire how Shikshantar is bringing back to life the thought of Tagore and others. Societal learnings, like individual lessons, are extinguished if not used.



She: But be realistic. How can learning parks compete with the juggernaut of global schooling? The global corporations are producing wealth, and will demand the human capital trained to fit their needs.

He: Yes. But the new economy depends on collective learning and will reward those skilled in it. Kids trained in factory schools for factory jobs will miss out.

She: It's not fair.

Offstage, center, Young Voices: "Asks the Possible of the Impossible, 'Where is your dwelling place?' 'In the dreams of the powerless,' comes the answer."

He, walking over to his wife: Poets are futurists. They help make future possibilities more real for others. They further society's learning of possibilities that lean toward the yearning of the divine whole.

He, putting his arms around her pregnant belly: What are your dreams for our child?

She: Self rule.

Voices: "Life's purpose is the fullest growth of freedom of the soul."

He: Do most schools encourage kids to learn to rule themselves?

She: Some. Not enough.

He: What if we formed our own learning space for our children?

She: Many of our friends have told us they want the same for their kids as we want for ours. More important, the kids want the same.

He: Our neighbor is already schooling her children at home.

She: Too much isolation. Kids need other kids.

He: We could join forces.

She, tearing out another check from the checkbook: We don't have the resources.

He: Some people have worked out hybrid programs with their schools, so the kids get access to the school's resources, while relieving the schools of some teaching costs.

She: I'll ask about that at school.

He: And today we have a global classroom - the Internet.

She, tearing off another check: That's for those who can afford it and have access.

He: I know people who will help.

She: The kids could email, chat, exchange poems and share videos of their lives with kids around the world.

All Voices: Visva-Bharati, "Yatra Visam Bhavatyekanidam - All the World in One Nest."

He: Tagore cared for India, but looked beyond narrow nationalism. I think he would seize on the Internet's potential for international understanding. If we used it with our local learning spaces, our children would grow to have both knowledge of their local reality and a sense of the global whole. Many schools now cut off kids from both, suffocating societal learning. But our learning spaces could build societal learning that appreciates both the parts and the whole.

She: While at home and with our friends.

He: Where our child will feel the kind of care only we can give.

All Voices, offstage, high, right: “[Children] should have not mere schools for their lessons, but a world whose guiding spirit is love.”

She: Know of a standardized test for love?

He: I like bantering with you.

She: Me, too.

Offstage, gentle raga music:

He: May I have this dance?

They dance. Offstage, the raga music merges with All Voices, from offstage, high, right, singing: “Jano gano mangala daayaka/ Jaya hey Bharati Bhagya Bidhata/ Jaya hey, jaya hey, jaya hey/ Jaya jaya jaya hey.” (You who impart well being to the people!/ Victory and glory be to You, Lord of the fate of India/ Victory be to you!/ Victory, victory, victory to thee).

— Jock McClellan

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**Note:**

Because the form is casual, I've not included endnotes. If you are interested in sources, the “Voices” are all quotes from Tagore, findable in the works cited by Shilpa, or on the many web sites on Tagore, including some with audio clips of his music. The Shelly quote is from his *Defense of Poetry*; Blake's is from *Auguries of Innocence*. Stanley Burnshaw's *The Seamless Web* examines poetry as an statement of the artist's bodily organism. Robert Sternberg's *Handbook of Creativity* includes discussion of the biological basis of creativity. Howard Gardner's *Creating Minds*, using ideas from Czikszentmihalyi, stresses the importance of the field of judges in the social system of creativity. Kenneth Koch has great ideas about the teaching of poetry in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*. Alfie Kohn's latest book, *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, reviews research in support of “whole language.” Peter Sack's *Standardized Minds* discusses the hazards of standardized tests. Russell Jacoby's *Social Amnesia* dissects the ways Freud's ideas got watered down. Robert Reich's *The Work of Nations* shows how rewards will increasingly go to symbolic analytic problem solvers skilled in abstraction, systems thinking, experimentation, and collaboration.

## Selected Poems by Rabindranath Tagore

### **On The Seashore**

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet.  
The infinite sky is motionless overhead and the restless water is boisterous. On the  
seashore of endless worlds the children meet with shouts and dances.

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.

They know not how to swim, they know not how to cast nets. Pearl-fishers dive for  
pearls, merchants sail in their ships, while children gather pebbles and scatter them  
again. They seek not for hidden treasures, they know not how to cast nets.

The sea surges up with laughter, and pale gleams the smile of the sea-beach.  
Death-dealing waves sing meaningless ballads to the children, even like a mother  
while rocking her baby's cradle. The sea plays with children, and pale gleams the  
smile of the sea-beach.

On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. Tempest roams in the pathless  
sky, ships are wrecked in the trackless water, death is abroad and children play. On  
the seashore of endless worlds is the great meeting of children.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Playthings**

Child, how happy you are sitting in the dust, playing with a broken twig all the  
morning.

I smile at your play with that little bit of a broken twig.  
I am busy with my accounts, adding up figures by the hour.  
Perhaps you glance at me and think, "What a stupid game to spoil your morning  
with!"

Child, I have forgotten the art of being absorbed in sticks and mud-pies.  
I seek out costly playthings, and gather lumps of gold and silver.  
With whatever you find you create your glad games, I spend both my time and my  
strength over things I never can obtain.

In my frail canoe I struggle to cross the sea of desire, and forget that I too am  
playing a game.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Vocation**

When the gong sounds ten in the morning and I walk to school by our lane,  
Every day I meet the hawker crying, “Bangles, crystal bangles!”  
There is nothing to hurry him on, there is no road he must take, no place he must  
go to, no time when he must come home.  
I wish I were a hawker, spending my day in the road, crying, “Bangles, crystal  
bangles!”

When at four in the afternoon I come back from the school,  
I can see through the gate of that house the gardener digging the ground.  
He does what he likes with his spade, he soils his clothes with dust, nobody take  
him to task if he gets baked in the sun or gets wet.  
I wish I were a gardener digging away at the garden with nobody to stop me from  
digging.

Just as it gets dark in the evening and my mother sends me to bed,  
I can see through my open window the watchman walking up and down.  
The lane is dark and lonely, and the street-lamp stands like a giant with one red eye  
in its head.  
The watchman swings his lantern and walks with his shadow at his side, and never  
once goes to bed in his life.  
I wish I were a watchman walking the streets all night, chasing the shadows with my  
lantern.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Authorship**

You say that father writes a lot of books, but what he writes I don't understand.  
He was reading to you all the evening, but could you really make out what he  
meant?  
What nice stories, mother, you can tell us! Why can't father write like that, I wonder?  
Did he never hear from his own mother stories of giants and fairies and princesses?  
Has he forgotten them all?

Often when he gets late for his bath you have to go and call him an hundred times.  
You wait and keep his dishes warm for him, but he goes on writing and forgets.  
Father always plays at making books.

If ever I go to play in father's room, you come and call me, “what a naughty child!”

If I make the slightest noise, you say, "Don't you see that father's at his work?"  
What's the fun of always writing and writing?

When I take up father's pen or pencil and write upon his book just as he does, — a,  
b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, — why do you get cross with me, then, mother?  
You never say a word when father writes.

When my father wastes such heaps of paper, mother, you don't seem to mind at all.  
But if I take only one sheet to make a boat with, you say, "Child, how troublesome  
you are!"

What do you think of father's spoiling sheets and sheets of paper with black marks  
all over on both sides?

\* \* \* \* \*

*Though it appears in school textbooks, the metaphorical aspect of this famous story by Tagore is often missed. It is viewed as a 'fairy tale' about a king and a parrot, rather than as a scathing commentary on the education system.*

### **The Parrot's Training**

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS a bird. It was ignorant. It sang all right, but never recited scriptures. It hopped pretty frequently, but lacked manners.

Said the Raja to himself: 'Ignorance is costly in the long run. For fools consume as much food as their betters, and yet give nothing in return.'

He called his nephews to his presence and told them that the bird must have a sound schooling.

The pundits were summoned, and at once went to the root of the matter. They decided that the ignorance of birds was due to their natural habit of living in poor nests. Therefore, according to the pundits, the first thing necessary for this bird's education was a suitable cage.

The pundits had their rewards and went home happy.

A golden cage was built with gorgeous decorations. Crowds came to see it from all parts of the world. 'Culture, captured and caged!' exclaimed some, in a rapture of ecstasy, and burst into tears. Others remarked: 'Even if culture be missed, the cage will remain, to the end, a substantial fact. How fortunate for the bird!'

The goldsmith filled his bag with money and lost no tune in sailing homewards.

The pundit sat down to educate the bird. With proper deliberation he took his pinch of snug, as he said: 'Textbooks can never be too many for our purpose!'

The nephews brought together an enormous crowd of scribes. They copied from books, and copied from copies, till the manuscripts were piled up to an unreachable height. Men murmured in amazement. 'Oh, the tower of culture, egregiously high! The end of it lost in the clouds!'

The scribes, with light hearts, hurried home, their pockets heavily laden.

The nephews were furiously busy keeping the cage in proper trim. As their constant scrubbing and polishing went on, the people said with satisfaction: 'This is progress indeed!'

Men were employed in large numbers and supervisors were still more numerous. These, with their cousins of all different degrees of distance, built a palace for themselves and lived there happily ever after.

Whatever may be its other deficiencies, the world is never in want of fault-finders; and they went about saying that every creature remotely connected with the cage flourished beyond words, excepting only the bird.

When this remark reached the Raja's ears, he summoned his nephews before him and said: 'My dear nephews, what is this that we hear?'

The nephews said in answer: 'Sire, let the testimony of the goldsmiths and the pundits, the scribes and the supervisors be taken, if the truth is to be known. Food is scarce with the fault-finders, and that is why their tongues have gained in sharpness.'

The explanation was so luminously satisfactory that the Raja decorated each one of his nephews with his own rare jewels.

The Raja at length, being desirous of seeing with his own eyes how his Education Department busied itself with the little bird, made his appearance one day at the great Hall of Learning.

From the gate rose the sounds of conch-shells and gongs, horns, bugles and trumpets, cymbals, drums and kettledrums, tomtoms, tambourines, flutes, fifes,

barrel-organs and bagpipes. The pundits began chanting mantras with their topmost voices, while the goldsmiths, scribes, supervisors, and their numberless cousins of all different degrees of distance, loudly raised a round of cheers.

The nephews smiled and said: 'Sire, what do you think of it all?'

The Raja said: 'It does seem so fearfully like a sound principle of Education!'

Mightily pleased, the Raja was about to remount his elephant, when the fault-finder, from behind some bush, cried out: 'Maharaja, have you seen the bird?'

'Indeed, I have not!' exclaimed the Raja. 'I completely forgot about the bird.'

Turning back, he asked the pundits about the method they followed in instructing the bird. It was shown to him. He was immensely impressed. The method was so stupendous that the bird looked ridiculously unimportant in comparison. 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. It sent a thrill through one's body to watch the process.

This time, while remounting his elephant, the Raja ordered his State ear-puller to give a thorough good pull at both the ears of the fault-finder.

The bird thus crawled on, duly and properly, to the safest verge of inanity. In fact, its progress was satisfactory in the extreme. Nevertheless, Nature occasionally triumphed over training, and when the morning light peeped into the bird's cage it sometimes fluttered its wings in a reprehensible manner. And, though it is hard to believe, it pitifully pecked at its bars with its feeble beak.

'What impertinence!' growled the kotwal.

The blacksmith, with his forge and hammer, took his place in the Raja's Department of Education. Oh, what resounding blows! The iron chain was soon completed, and the bird's wings were clipped.

The Raja's brothers-in-law looked black, and shook their heads, saying: 'These birds not only lack good sense, but also gratitude!'

With text-book in one hand and baton in the other, the pundits gave the poor bird what may fitly be called lessons!

The kotwal was honoured with a title for his watchfulness, and the blacksmith for his skill in forging chains.

The bird died.

Nobody had the least notion how long ago this had happened. The fault-finder was the first man to spread the rumour.

The Raja called his nephews and asked them, 'My dear nephews, what is this that we hear?'

The nephews said: 'Sire, the bird's education has been completed.'

'Does it hop?' the Raja enquired.

'Never!' said the nephews.

'Does it fly?'

'No.'

'Bring me the bird,' said the Raja.

The bird was brought to him, guarded by the kotwal and the sepoy and the sowars. The Raja poked its body with his finger. Only its inner stuffing of book-leaves rustled.

Outside the window, the murmur of the spring breeze amongst the newly budded asoka leaves made the April morning wistful.

\* \* \* \* \*

*The Post Office is a short play by Tagore, in which Amal, a young boy, is confined to remain indoors because of some unnamed illness. Despite his infirmity, Amal has a love of life that is infectious. He shares this energy with and thus befriends all those who pass by his window, transforming their understandings of themselves and the worlds they live in. One imagines that Tagore wrote this play to illustrate children's love of exploration, experience, and Nature and to criticize those who would deprive them of it. In the following excerpt, Amal discusses learning with his adopted father, Madhav.*

Amal: Wish I were a squirrel! – it would be lovely. Uncle, why won't you let me go



about?

Madhav: Doctor says it's bad for you to be out.

Amal: How can the doctor know?

Madhav: What a thing to say! The doctor can't know and he reads such huge books!

Amal: Does his book-learning tell him everything?

Madhav: Of course, don't you know!

Amal (with a sigh): Ah, I am so stupid! I don't read books.

Madhav: Now, think of it; very, very learned people are all like you; they are  
never out of doors.

Amal: Aren't they really?

Madhav: No, how can they? Early and late they toil and moil at their books, and they've eyes for nothing else. Now, my little man, you are going to be learned when you grow up; and then you will stay at home and read such big books, and people will notice you and say, 'He's a wonder.'

Amal: No, no, Uncle; I beg of you by your dear feet — I don't want to be learned. I won't.

Madhav: Dear, dear; it would have been my saving if I could have been learned.

Amal: No, I would rather go about and see everything that there is.

Madhav: Listen to that! See! What will you see, what is there so much to see?

Amal: See that far-away hill from our window — I often long to go beyond those hills and right away.

Madhav: Oh, you silly! As if there's nothing more to be done but just get up to the top of that hill and away! Eh! You don't talk sense, my boy. Now, listen, since that hill stands there upright as a barrier, it means you can't get beyond it. Else, what was the use in heaping up so many large stones to make such a big affair of it, eh!

Amal: Uncle, do you think it is meant to prevent us from crossing over? It seems to me because the earth can't speak, it raises its hands into the sky and beckons. And those who live far off, and sit alone by their windows can see the signal. But I suppose the learned people —

Madhav: No, they don't have time for that sort of nonsense. They are not crazy like you.

\* \* \* \* \*

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, to ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

— from Gitanjali

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“Realization in Action,” p.117–134; “The Realization of Beauty,” p.135–144; and “The Realization of the Infinite,” p.145–164.

### Annex 1: Schedule of Interviews at Santiniketan

*Week 1: February 5, 2000 – February 11, 2000*

- 2/5/00: **Supriya Roy**, Librarian, Rabindra Bhavana  
2/5/00: **Bratin Chattopadhyay**, Teacher Patha Bhavana  
2/5/00: **Srikleha Chattopadhyay**, Teacher, Ananda Bhavana  
2/6/00: **Supriyo Tagore**, Former Principal (22 years), Patha Bhavana  
2/6/00: **K.G. Subramanyam**, Graduate and Professor of Kala Bhavana  
2/7/00: **Dinkar Kowshik**, Graduate, Professor and Former Principal, Kala Bhavana  
2/7/00: Observations of Sriniketan Marg Mela  
2/7/00: **Aruti Sen**, Former Principal, Vinaya Bhavana  
2/8/00: **Riten Mozumdar**, Graduate and Professor, Kala Bhavana  
2/8/00: **Dipankar Chatterjee**, Professor and Former Principal, Vidya Bhavana  
2/9/00: **Uma Datta**, Former Student, Brahmacharyasrama, 1926–1932  
2/9/00: **Amita Sen**, Former Student, Brahmacharyasrama, 1920–1928  
2/10/00: **Swapan Majumdar**, Director, Rabindra Bhavana  
2/10/00: **Sanat Kar**, Professor and Former Principal, Kala Bhavana  
2/11/00: Class Observations at Patha Bhavana  
2/11/00: **Gautam Bhattacharya**, Bengali Teacher, Patha Bhavana  
2/11/00: **Devi Mukherjee**, Professor, Vinaya Bhavana  
2/11/00: **Amitabh Choudary**, Public Relations Officer of Visva–Bharati, Graduate of Patha Bhavana ('69) and Vidya Bhavana ('75)

*Week 2: February 12, 2000 – February 18, 2000*

- 2/12/00: Observations of Siksha Satra  
2/12/00: **S. Roy**, Principal, Siksha Satra  
2/12/00: Observations of Reunion Program and Shahito Sabha  
2/14/00: Observations of Patha Bhavana Sports Days  
2/14/00: **Kajal Roy Choudhury** and Family, Active Alumni, Visva Bharati  
2/15/00: **Chanchal Banerjee**, Principal, Patha Bhavana  
2/15/00: **Dr. Dilip Sinha**, Vice–Chancellor, Visva–Bharati  
2/16/00: Observations of Weekly Prayer in Mandir  
2/16/00: **Srikleha Chattopadhyay**, Teacher, Ananda Bhavana  
2/16/00: **Sumita Bhattacharya**, Bengali Professor, Shiksha Bhavana  
2/17/00: Focus Group Meeting with the English Teachers of Patha Bhavana  
2/17/00: **Dr. Namita Das**, Professor, Vinaya Bhavana

- 2/18/00: **Supriyo Tagore**, Former Principal (22 years), Patha Bhavana  
2/18/00: Observations of Visva–Bharati Sports Days  
2/18/00: **Avik Ghosh**, Graduate ('78) and Geography Teacher, Patha Bhavana  
2/18/00: **Pulok Dutta**, Graduate ('75) and Art Teacher, Patha Bhavana

*Week 3: February 19, 2000 – February 25, 2000*

- 2/19/00: **Mishtunin Roy**, Graduate (Patha Bhavana '61) and Professor, Kala Bhavana  
2/19/00: **Soumik Nandi Mazumder**, Professor, Kala Bhavana  
2/20/00: Class Observations at Patha Bhavana  
2/21/00: Class Observations at Patha Bhavana  
2/21/00: **Prodipto Roy**, Graduate (Patha Bhavana '93) and Student, Kala Bhavana  
2/22/00: **Amlan Dutta**, Former Vice Chancellor, Visva–Bharati  
2/24/00: **Dr. Subir Mukherjee**, Active Alumni of Patha Bhavana ('61)

## Annex 2: Interview Questions

### *On Tagore:*

What do you see as the essence of Tagore's idea of education?  
What do you see as the essence of Tagore's idea of government/polity?  
What do you see as the essence of Tagore's idea of society?  
What do you see as the essence of Tagore's idea of the human being?

What has been the impact of Tagore's ideas on yourself?  
What has been the impact of Tagore's ideas on the education system?  
What has been the impact of Tagore's ideas on society?

### *On Santiniketan of the Past:*

What was Santiniketan like when you were there?  
What was the environment like?  
What did you 'study'?  
What were the teachers like? What were the students like?

Why did you come to Santiniketan? What did/do you like and dislike about it?

### *On Santiniketan Today:*

How has Santiniketan changed or evolved since Tagore's death?  
How has Sriniketan changed or evolved since L.K. Elmhirst's departure?

How has Santiniketan incorporated new research ideas in education into its philosophy or learning spaces?

How do you describe the spirit of Santiniketan today?

What is the pedagogical philosophy of Santiniketan today?

What are today's students like? What do they come to Santiniketan for?

What do the majority of the graduates of Santiniketan go on to do?

### *On the Future:*

What can we learn from Tagore to transform our present system of education?



How do you see Santiniketan responding to, anticipating, or creating solutions for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

How would you change/improve Santiniketan?

### Annex 3: Places in Santiniketan

**Visva-Bharati:** the international university that took over all the educational activities at Santiniketan, when it was founded in 1922

**Patha-Bhavana:** the original school

**Kala-Bhavana:** School of the Arts (Nandalal Bose)

**Vidya-Bhavana:** School of Higher Studies

**Sri-Bhavana:** women's hostel

**Siksha-Bhavana:** college that provides regular courses of study in both science and arts subjects for those who want to sit for the Intermediate and Bachelor's Degree examinations

**Sangit-Bhavana:** Music Department

**Cheena-Bhavana:** Department of Sino-Indian Studies

**Hindi-Bhavana:** Hindi Studies; also Departments of Islamic and Zoroastrian Studies

**Uttarayan:** collective name for group of buildings used by Tagore as his residence

**Rabindra-Bhavana:** houses a unique collection of the Poet's published work

**Vinaya-Bhavana:** college of education; course for one year; apart from usual pedagogical subjects, it provides for training in educational crafts, music, and art. Idea is to train a band of teachers imbued with the educational ideals of Tagore and full equipped to deal with school education in all aspects.

#### **Libraries**

**Granthan-Vibhaga:** Publishing Department of Tagore's works

**Sriniketan:** sister settlement that is two miles away (L.K. Elmhirst's work), with crafts and cooperatives, agriculture and adult education, anti-malaria work and boys scouts

**Institute of Rural Reconstruction**

**Silpa-Bhavana:** Hall of Industries

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For more information on Tagore's life, please see <http://www.swaraj.net> or Dutta and Robinson, Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man (full reference in bibliography).
- <sup>2</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri, "Gandhi and Tagore: Where the Twain Met," p.141.
- <sup>3</sup> I do not know for certain why Tagore's vast English writings are rarely recognized or read. I speculate that this may be due to the fact that many people think he wrote only in Bengali, and few translations of his work are available (which is true). Although recently (in 1998), Sahitya Akademi published three huge volumes of his collected writings in English, perhaps also his work was not published and distributed to a large extent. These two reasons may explain his virtual neglect by the academic and intellectual communities.
- <sup>4</sup> For examples, check out Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences, the brain-based studies of learning by Geoffrey and Renata Caine, Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence, the research compiled by the Center for Arts in the Basic Curriculum, and others.
- <sup>5</sup> "My School," Lectures and Addresses, p.20.
- <sup>6</sup> I refer to and draw upon Ivan Illich's revolutionary work, where he crowned the terms, 'de-schooling' and 'de-institutionalizing'. Deschooling Society, Reprinted under Marion Boyars, et al, in 1999.
- <sup>7</sup> "Realization in Love," Sadhana, p.112.
- <sup>8</sup> "Meditation," Personality, p.163-164.
- <sup>9</sup> "My School," Personality, p.113.
- <sup>10</sup> "My School," Personality, p.121.
- <sup>11</sup> See additional writings on rethinking the notion of poverty by contemporary counter-development thinker-doers, like Ivan Illich, Wolfgang Sachs, and Mahjid Rahnema.
- <sup>12</sup> The Religion of Man, p.23.
- <sup>13</sup> The Religion of Man, p.45.
- <sup>14</sup> "The Problem of Evil," Sadhana, p.57.
- <sup>15</sup> Sanyasi, p.477-478.
- <sup>16</sup> "The Problem of Self," Sadhana, p.84.
- <sup>17</sup> Religion of Man, 186.
- <sup>18</sup> Religion of Man, 135.
- <sup>19</sup> "What is Art?," Personality, p.32.
- <sup>20</sup> "What is Art?," Personality, p.14.
- <sup>21</sup> "The Second Birth," Personality, p.89.
- <sup>22</sup> "The Second Birth," Personality, p.95.
- <sup>23</sup> Gitanjali, Stanza LXXIII (73), p.49.
- <sup>24</sup> John Taylor Gatto in his article, "The Public School Nightmare: Why Fix a System Designed to Destroy Individual Thought" describes how human beings had been reduced to such mechanical categories as a precursor to the advent of the modern schooling system. In Deschooling Our Lives, Matt Hern, ed., 1996, pg. 41-42.
- <sup>25</sup> "The Voice of Humanity," Lectures and Addresses, p.146.
- <sup>26</sup> "City and Village," p.516-517.
- <sup>27</sup> The Religion of Man, p. 32.
- <sup>28</sup> "Woman," Personality, p. 183 and p.171
- <sup>29</sup> "To the Nation," p. 861
- <sup>30</sup> "What is Art?," Personality, p.37
- <sup>31</sup> "City and Village," p.511.
- <sup>32</sup> "City and Village," p.516.
- <sup>33</sup> "City and Village," p.513.
- <sup>34</sup> "Woman," Personality, p.171-2 and p.178.

- <sup>35</sup> “City and Village,” p.512.
- <sup>36</sup> “City and Village,” p.513.
- <sup>37</sup> “City and Village,” p.515.
- <sup>38</sup> “Nationalism in the West,” Nationalism, p.5.
- <sup>39</sup> “Nationalism in the West,” Nationalism, p.16.
- <sup>40</sup> “Nationalism in the West,” Nationalism, p.25.
- <sup>41</sup> “Nationalism in the West,” Nationalism, p.24.
- <sup>42</sup> “Woman,” Personality, p.182.
- <sup>43</sup> “Woman,” Personality, p.172.
- <sup>44</sup> “The Relation of the Individual to the Universe,” Sadhana, p.13.
- <sup>45</sup> “A Poet’s School,” in Chayan, S. ed., p.49
- <sup>46</sup> “To the Youth of Hyderabad,” p.672.
- <sup>47</sup> Return to Exile, p.20 and p.48
- <sup>48</sup> “Nationalism in India,” Nationalism, p.64.
- <sup>49</sup> “To the Youth of Hyderabad,” p.673–674.
- <sup>50</sup> “Nationalism in the West,” Nationalism, p.25.
- <sup>51</sup> Religion of Man, p.104.
- <sup>52</sup> “The Educational Mission of the Visva-Bharati,” p.629.
- <sup>53</sup> “To the Youth of Hyderabad,” p.673.
- <sup>54</sup> “The Problem of Evil,” Sadhana, p.62.
- <sup>55</sup> “The Educational Mission of the Visva-Bharati,” p.628–629.
- <sup>56</sup> Religion of Man, p.116.
- <sup>57</sup> “The Relation of the Individual to the Universe,” Sadhana, p.13–14.
- <sup>58</sup> Religion of Man, p.127 and p.135.
- <sup>59</sup> “Woman,” Personality, p.182.
- <sup>60</sup> Religion of Man, p.150–1.
- <sup>61</sup> Religion of Man, p.149.
- <sup>62</sup> “The Relation of the Individual to the Universe,” Sadhana, p.13–14.
- <sup>63</sup> Nandy, Return to Exile, p.88.
- <sup>64</sup> Nandy, Return to Exile, p.87.
- <sup>65</sup> “Nationalism in the West,” Nationalism, p.5.
- <sup>66</sup> “To the Nation,” p.859.
- <sup>67</sup> “Nationalism in India,” Nationalism, p.70.
- <sup>68</sup> “Nationalism in India,” Nationalism, p.60–61.
- <sup>69</sup> Throughout much of his life, Tagore attempted to separate the knowledge, creativity and arts of the West from its political and economic policies, to demonstrate that it could produce something of value. But towards the end of his life, with the Second World War in progress, Tagore’s hope appeared to be shattered, as he mourned the West’s utter moral bankruptcy. See Ashis Nandy, Return to Exile, p.83–88.
- <sup>70</sup> “Youth of Hyderabad,” p.672 and p.674.
- <sup>71</sup> “Youth of Hyderabad,” p.675.
- <sup>72</sup> This famous quote by Ambedkar appears in many places, including in G. Mathew and R. Nayak, Panchayats at Work: What it Means for the Oppressed? New Delhi: Institute of Social Sciences, 1996.
- <sup>73</sup> “City and Village,” p.517.
- <sup>74</sup> Religion of Man, p.202.
- <sup>75</sup> “My School,” Personality, p.130
- <sup>76</sup> “The Relation of the Individual to the Universe,” Sadhana, p.19
- <sup>77</sup> Religion of Man, p.45.
- <sup>78</sup> “Sunset of the Century,” Nationalism, p.81–82.
- <sup>79</sup> “The Call of Truth,” p.78.

- <sup>80</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri, in his short essay, “Gandhi and Tagore: Where the Twain Met,” offers a much-needed account of the many issues that Tagore and Gandhi agreed on and grew through dialogue together. By deflecting our attention to their differences (which were usually complementary instead of opposite), both scholars and purveyors of popular knowledge have ignored their many similarities.
- <sup>81</sup> A charkha is a wheel that takes raw cotton and shapes it into thread. It was a prominent symbol of the Independence movement, because it challenged the production and purchasing of cloth from Manchester, England, and encouraged the creation and use of home-grown cloth. Mahatma Gandhi was its strongest advocate.
- <sup>82</sup> “The Call of Truth,” p.71.
- <sup>83</sup> “The Call of Truth,” p.103 and p.106
- <sup>84</sup> “Striving for Swaraj,” p.116 and p.118.
- <sup>85</sup> Many of these are referenced in the text that follows, but works like Crescent Moon and The Post Office are worth highlighting.
- <sup>86</sup> “The Schoolmaster,” p.504.
- <sup>87</sup> “My School,” Personality, p.116.
- <sup>88</sup> “The Parrot’s Training,” Chayan, ed., p.100.
- <sup>89</sup> “A Poet’s School,” p.53
- <sup>90</sup> It is worth noting that different communities and cultures have different notions of what ‘childhood’ is. A critique of schooling in other places would need to take into account these various understandings. For the most part, however, I imagine that people all over the world do differ in their expectations for young people (to varying ages) vs. those for older people.
- <sup>91</sup> “My School,” Personality, p.118.
- <sup>92</sup> “The Schoolmaster,” p.506.
- <sup>93</sup> “The Schoolmaster,” p.509.
- <sup>94</sup> “The Schoolmaster,” p.509.
- <sup>95</sup> “My School,” Personality, p.126.
- <sup>96</sup> Religion of Man, p.126.
- <sup>97</sup> “A Poet’s School,” p.57.
- <sup>98</sup> “The Schoolmaster,” p.508.
- <sup>99</sup> “The Philosophical Approach to Sriniketan,” in Chayan, S. ed, p.91.
- <sup>100</sup> “My School,” Personality, p.129.
- <sup>101</sup> “The Schoolmaster,” p.508.
- <sup>102</sup> “A Poet’s School,” in Chayan, S. ed., p.64.
- <sup>103</sup> “The Philosophical Approach to Sriniketan,” in Chayan, S. ed., p.93.
- <sup>104</sup> “A Poet’s School,” in Chayan, S. ed., p.60.
- <sup>105</sup> “The Art of Movement in Education,” in Chayan, S. ed., p.105.
- <sup>106</sup> Insights into deep learning vs. surface learning can be found in Theodore J. Marchese’s article, “New Conversations About Learning,” available on [www.21learn.org](http://www.21learn.org).
- <sup>107</sup> “The Art of Movement in Education,” in Chayan, S. ed., p.103.
- <sup>108</sup> “The Schoolmaster,” p.509.
- <sup>109</sup> “My School,” Personality, p.144–146.
- <sup>110</sup> “The Philosophical Approach to Sriniketan,” in Chayan, S. ed., p.89.
- <sup>111</sup> “My School,” Personality, p.124.
- <sup>112</sup> “My School,” Personality, p.139.
- <sup>113</sup> “On the Seashore,” The Crescent Moon, p.3.
- <sup>114</sup> Other theorist-practitioners of radical pedagogy include Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and bell hooks.
- <sup>115</sup> “The Schoolmaster,” p.507.
- <sup>116</sup> “A Poet’s School,” in Chayan, S. ed., p.63.
- <sup>117</sup> “My School,” Personality, p.134.
- <sup>118</sup> “My School,” Personality, p.147.

- <sup>119</sup> "A Poet's School," in Chayan, S. ed., p.63.
- <sup>120</sup> "A Poet's School," in Chayan, S. ed., p.64.
- <sup>121</sup> Religion of Man, p.166.
- <sup>122</sup> See Uma Dasgupta, "Santiniketan", in Knowledge, Power & Politics: Educational Institutions in India, Mushirul Hasan, ed., New Delhi: Roli Books Ltd, 1998; H.B. Mukherjee, Education for Fulness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962; and Bratin Chattopadhyay, On Education and Rabindranath, Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 2000.
- <sup>123</sup> Santiniketan refers to the place, the name of the area in rural Bengal, where Tagore started the Brahmacharyasrama in 1901. However, over time, Santiniketan has come to be used interchangeably as the name for the 'school' (Patha Bhavana) and 'university' (Visva-Bharati). I will endeavor to use the specific names of each institution, though when the word 'Santiniketan' appears, it can be said to encompass the entire experiment, including Sriniketan, the institutions located in the rural settlement two miles from Santiniketan.
- <sup>124</sup> "My School," in Personality, p.115.
- <sup>125</sup> The original name Tagore gave to his experiment; it literally means "ashram for the *brahmacharyas*," the seekers of truth, wisdom, etc. This has nothing to do with caste; Tagore accepted children of all castes and had condemned the injustices committed in the name of caste.
- <sup>126</sup> "My School," in Personality, p.137.
- <sup>127</sup> "My School," in Personality, p.119.
- <sup>128</sup> "The Educational Mission of the Visva-Bharati," p.627.
- <sup>129</sup> "My School," Personality, p.118.
- <sup>130</sup> "My School," Personality, p.146.
- <sup>131</sup> Interview with Uma Dutta, a child in *Brahmacharyasrama* from 1926–1932, on February 9, 2000.
- <sup>132</sup> "A Poet's School," in Chayan, ed., p.58.
- <sup>133</sup> A Japanese teacher had come to the ashram and taught jujitsu to both boys and girls. Interview with Uma Dutta, a child in *Brahmacharyasrama* from 1926–1932, on February 9, 2000.
- <sup>134</sup> "A Poet's School," in Chayan, ed., p.59 and p.62.
- <sup>135</sup> Interview Aruti Sen, former director and professor in *Vinaya Bhavan*, the 'Education College', February 7, 2000.
- <sup>136</sup> Interview with Supriyo Tagore, great-great-nephew of Tagore and principal of *Patha-Bhavana* for 22 years, February 6, 2000.
- <sup>137</sup> Interview with Uma Dutta, a child in *Brahmacharyasrama* from 1926–1932, on February 9, 2000.
- <sup>138</sup> "A Poet's School," in Chayan, ed., p.61.
- <sup>139</sup> "A Poet's School," in Chayan, ed., p.61.
- <sup>140</sup> Interview with Uma Dutta, a child in *Brahmacharyasrama* from 1926–1932, on February 9, 2000.
- <sup>141</sup> "The Educational Mission of the Visva-Bharati," p.628.
- <sup>142</sup> "My School," in Personality, p.138.
- <sup>143</sup> Interview with Uma Dutta, a child in *Brahmacharyasrama* from 1926–1932, on February 9, 2000.
- <sup>144</sup> "The Educational Mission of the Visva-Bharati," p.627.
- <sup>145</sup> "My School," in Personality, p.141.
- <sup>146</sup> K.G. Subramanyam, renowned artist, graduate of and professor in *Kala Bhavana*, recalling his time at *Kala Bhavana* in a short essay, "A Lost Paradise?" written October 1, 1999, which he shared and discussed with me on February 6, 2000.
- <sup>147</sup> Interview with Dinkar Kowshik, graduate of, former professor of and former principal of *Kala Bhavana*, on February 7, 2000.
- <sup>148</sup> "Visva-Bharati," in Santiniketan, p.3.
- <sup>149</sup> "New Education Fellowship," p.815.
- <sup>150</sup> "Visva-Bharati," in Santiniketan, p.2.

- <sup>151</sup> Note that “siksha” is not perfectly translated into “education”. Rather, its meaning incorporates a different set of roles, goals, and values for *shishyas* and *gurus*. However, for lack of a better term, it has been widely (and crudely) translated as education.
- <sup>152</sup> L.K. Elmhirst, “Siksha–Sastra,” in Chayan, ed., p.68.
- <sup>153</sup> L.K. Elmhirst, “Siksha–Sastra,” in Chayan, ed., p.69, p.70, p.75, p.75, p.79.
- <sup>154</sup> L.K. Elmhirst, “Siksha–Sastra,” in Chayan, ed., p.72.
- <sup>155</sup> L.K. Elmhirst, “Siksha–Sastra,” in Chayan, ed., p.82.
- <sup>156</sup> Quoted in L.K. Elmhirst, “The Foundation of Sriniketan,” in Chayan, ed., p.37.
- <sup>157</sup> “A Poet’s School,” in Chayan, ed., p.59.
- <sup>158</sup> “A Poet’s School,” in Chayan, ed., p.59.
- <sup>159</sup> Interview Aruti Sen, former director and professor in Vinaya Bhavan, the ‘Education College’, February 7, 2000.
- <sup>160</sup> Interview with English teachers of Patha Bhavana, February 17, 2000.
- <sup>161</sup> Observation, February 20, 2000.
- <sup>162</sup> Interview with Pulok Dutto, art teacher, Patha Bhavana, February 19, 2000.
- <sup>163</sup> Interview with Dinkar Kowshik, graduate of, former professor of, and former principal of, Kala Bhavana, on February 7, 2000.
- <sup>164</sup> Interview with Riten Mozumdar, former student of Patha Bhavana, and professor and graduate of Kala Bhavan, February 8, 2000.
- <sup>165</sup> Interview Aruti Sen, former director and professor in Vinaya Bhavana, the ‘Education College’, February 7, 2000.
- <sup>166</sup> Interview with Riten Mozumdar, former student of Patha Bhavana, and professor and graduate of Kala Bhavan, February 8, 2000.
- <sup>167</sup> Interview with Pulok Dutto, art teacher, Patha Bhavana, February 19, 2000.
- <sup>168</sup> Observations of Sriniketan’s Marg Mela, February 7, 2000.
- <sup>169</sup> Observation of a Sahito Sabha, February 12, 2000. However, I must note that several alumni attended this literary evening, as it was a reunion weekend for them. Part of the audience chatter was certainly due to their presence. Yet, interestingly, the alumni had far greater spontaneity and diversity in their contributions to the forum: guitar and tabla playing, solo singing and dancing, etc.
- <sup>170</sup> Interview with Gautam Bhattacharya, Bengali teacher at Patha Bhavana for 23 years, February 11, 2000.
- <sup>171</sup> Observations of February 11, and February 20, 2000; Interview with English teachers of Patha Bhavana, February 17, 2000.
- <sup>172</sup> Interview with Supriyo Tagore, great–great nephew of Tagore and principal of Patha Bhavana for 22 years, February 6, 2000.
- <sup>173</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>174</sup> Observations at playground of February 15, 2000.
- <sup>175</sup> Interview Aruti Sen, former director and professor in Vinaya Bhavana, the ‘Education College’, February 7, 2000.
- <sup>176</sup> Interview with Dr. Chanchal Banerjee, Principal, Patha Bhavana, February 15, 2000.
- <sup>177</sup> Observations at playground of February 15 and February 18, 2000.
- <sup>178</sup> Interview with Dinkar Kowshik, graduate of, former professor of, and former principal of, Kala Bhavana, on February 7, 2000.
- <sup>179</sup> I was fortunate enough to meet both ‘varieties’ of teachers in the course of my three–week stay at Santiniketan.
- <sup>180</sup> Interview with Riten Mozumdar, former student of Patha Bhavana, and professor and graduate of Kala Bhavan, February 8, 2000.
- <sup>181</sup> Interview with Dipankar Chatterjee, former professor of physics at Siksha–Bhavana, February 8, 2000.



- <sup>182</sup> Interview with Dipankar Chatterjee, former professor of physics at Siksha-Bhavana, February 8, 2000.
- <sup>183</sup> Interview with English teachers of Patha Bhavana, February 17, 2000.
- <sup>184</sup> Frequently quoted statement, found in the letters exchanged between Gandhi and Tagore.
- <sup>185</sup> Interview with Dipankar Chatterjee, former professor of physics at Siksha-Bhavana, February 8, 2000.
- <sup>186</sup> Interview with Dr. Subir Mukherjee, ex-student of Patha Bhavana, from 1961-67, February 24, 2000.
- <sup>187</sup> Interview with Supriyo Tagore, great-great nephew of Tagore and principal of Patha Bhavana for 22 years, February 6, 2000.
- <sup>188</sup> Interview with Dinkar Kowshik, graduate of, former professor of, and former principal of, Kala Bhavana, on February 7, 2000.
- <sup>189</sup> Interview with class 7 students on February 11, 2000.
- <sup>190</sup> Interview with Bratin and Srilekha Chatterjee, teachers of Patha Bhavana and Ananda Bhavana, February 5, 2000.
- <sup>191</sup> Interview with Supriyo Tagore, February 6, 2000.
- <sup>192</sup> Interview with Avik Ghosh, former student (1972-1978), current teacher and guardian of boys' hostel, Patha Bhavana, February 18, 2000.
- <sup>193</sup> Interview with Bratin and Srilekha Chatterjee, teachers of Patha Bhavana and Ananda Bhavana, February 5, 2000.
- <sup>194</sup> Interview with Chanchal Banerjee, current Principal, Patha Bhavana, February 19, 2000.
- <sup>195</sup> Interview with Chanchal Banerjee, current Principal, Patha Bhavana, February 19, 2000.
- <sup>196</sup> Interview with S. Roy, Principal of Siksha-Sastra for the last three years, February 14, 2000.
- <sup>197</sup> Interview with Dr. Dilip Sinha, Vice Chancellor of Visva-Bharati, February 15, 2000. It is unclear what Dr. Sinha meant by 'the global level' but I speculate that he was perhaps referring to Tagore's work on East-West exchange and partnership.
- <sup>198</sup> Interview with Dr. Dilip Sinha, Vice Chancellor of Visva-Bharati, February 15, 2000.
- <sup>199</sup> Another example of this mis-appropriation can be found in "Tagore and His India" (1997), an article by Nobel Prize-winner Amartya Sen. Sen claims that if Tagore were alive in India in 1997, "nothing would shock him as much as the continued illiteracy of the masses." In fact, "Tagore would see illiteracy and the neglect of education not only as the main source of India's continued social backwardness, but also as a great constraint that restricts the possibility and reach of economic development in India." For these reasons, Tagore wanted education, which Sen translates as schools, to be spread throughout the country. Sen also claims that Tagore would feel the urgency to 'remove endemic poverty', that he would appreciate the 'freedoms' of 'democratic India,' and that he would not resent the development of modern industries and technological progress. Not surprisingly, the views that are presented as Tagore's are remarkably similar to Sen's own ideas about education and development.
- <sup>200</sup> Interview with Riten Mozumdar, former student of Patha Bhavana, and professor and graduate of Kala Bhavana, February 8, 2000.
- <sup>201</sup> A conference was held in 1993 to discuss the problems with Santiniketan and possibilities for new directions. Unfortunately, according to K.G. Subramanyan, one attendee, nothing has changed.
- <sup>202</sup> Reference to Francis Fukuyama's book by the same name, The End of History and the Last Man, 1993.
- <sup>203</sup> Reference to the World Bank's (and others') Human Development Reports and other Development documentation.
- <sup>204</sup> Reference to Maslow's hierarchy of basic needs.
- <sup>205</sup> "City and Village," p.518.
- <sup>206</sup> "City and Village," p.518.

<sup>207</sup> Planning is the less conspicuous (but equally pernicious) daughter of social engineering, so aptly described by Arturo Escobar in “Planning” in The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power, Wolfgang Sachs, ed., 1992.

<sup>208</sup> “Civilization and Progress,” Lectures and Addresses, p.58.

<sup>209</sup> K.G. Subramanyan, in “Patha–Bhavana – A Review,” 1993.

<sup>210</sup> This view was proposed by Swapan Majumdar and Riten Mozumdar, among others, in separate interviews.

<sup>211</sup> “New Education Fellowship,” p.815.

<sup>212</sup> “New Education Fellowship,” p.815.

<sup>213</sup> The lecture/addresses ,“A Poet’s School” and “My School”, are obvious examples.

<sup>214</sup> In Nationalism and “Civilization and Progress”, we find examples of these terms.

<sup>215</sup> I have confirmed this information with Bengali readers of Tagore, as I am unable to do so myself.

<sup>216</sup> Uma Dasgupta recalls how people turned to Gandhi for assistance, during his visit in 1945. He advised them to think of Gurudev (Tagore) and remain true to his vision.

<sup>217</sup> I suppose one can fault Tagore for this crisis, though one cannot argue that teachers, et al, did not have freedom to grow their own ideas and visions. However, one can speculate that Tagore’s personality unknowingly overshadowed such attempts, to counter the freedom he endorsed and create a dependency on him.

<sup>218</sup> Such ‘decentralization’ contrasts greatly with the ‘Education for All’ movement. As seen recently in the global conference in Dakar, Senegal (April 2000), it calls for more centralized authority, more stringent controls, more monitoring, more pervasive standardization, all in the face of unmet targets of universal primary schooling.

<sup>219</sup> I appreciate the candor of Swapan Majumdar and Namita Das, who, when interviewed, made this point painfully clear.

<sup>220</sup> Here, I appreciate the candor of Dinkar Kowshik and Riten Mozumdar, who both forcefully articulated their views on this issue.