Introduction

Let me start with the world as Tagore saw it at his time.

"The world today is wild with the delirium of hatred,
The conflicts are cruel and unceasing in anguish,
crooked are its paths, tangled its bonds of greed.
All creatures are crying for a new birth of thine,
O thou of boundless life,
save them, raise thine eternal voice of hope,
let Love’s lotus with its inexhaustible treasure of honey
open its petals in thy light.

O Serene, O Free,
in thine immeasurable mercy and goodness
wipe away all dark stains from the heart of this earth.”

In this era of globalisation the world of education is facing the same crisis, same “dark stains”.

Tagore desperately wanted to use education as an instrument to “wipe away all dark strains from the heart of this earth”.

His interest in educational reform started in 1893 when he wrote a series of articles on the topic with the Bengali title: “Sikshar Herfer” “Educational Reform” (Sadhana, March 1893). His ideas have been classified in three scientific stages for three periods: the observational period, the experimental period and the implementation period. I shall give an idea of these three stages in my presentation.

The period of observation (1893-1901)

His idea on education during this period was influenced by his own educational experience. Until he was twelve, he enjoyed attending a regular school to learn history, geography, arithmetic, grammar and other sciences in the maternal language: Bengali. Shortly afterwards he was admitted to a high school where the medium of instruction was English. He started hating the school and was terrorised by the teacher. (Uma Pan, Rabindranather
Sikshabhabana, “Educational thoughts of Rabindranath”, 1998) This experience made Tagore interested in the issue of medium of instruction in education. But there were more lessons for him:

The sole objective of education was to produce clerks and bureaucrats for the government in the interest of the British. The foundation of a national system of education based on the promotion of creativity, freedom, joy and conscience of cultural heritage was completely ignored.

The education imparted did not include the latest developments in other countries including the United Kingdom. It neglected development of scientific attitude and the spirit of curiosity. Learning the English language to follow the instruction took a long time and excluded a large number of capable students from education in the process because of their incompetence in English. This contributed in creating two classes: a small group of urban rich and a mass of poor rural people.

The education system did not allow for social mobility.

Tagore had to act.

This takes me to the second phase of Tagore’s idea on education during the period 1901 – 1918: the period of experiments.

In 1901 Tagore founded the “ashram school” in Santiniketan with the objective of providing education suitable for the country where national characteristics could be practised. This was set up on the ancient model of Tapovana with three fundamental Indian cultural characteristics: non-duality in the field of knowledge (‘advaitabadd’), universal friendship in the field of emotion and accomplishment of tasks without considering results in the field of action. He included elements of modern science and other useful modern subjects.

In a lecture organised by Sahitya Parishad in Calcutta in 1906 entitled: “Chhâtrader prati sambhâshan” (speech addressed to students) he severely criticised bookish learning and gave emphasis on practical learning observing nature and human behaviour in different regions of the country through direct sources and own free efforts. This gives capacity to learn how to learn, essential for development of human capacity, he suggested.
About the place of religion in education his ideas are very relevant to-day. “Nature and human spirit wedded together would constitute our temple and selfless deeds, our worship”, he propagated (Dharma Siksha, “Religious education” 1912).

According to him a national system of education should try to discover the characteristic truths of its civilization. Those truths for India are not commercialisation, imperialism or “fundamentalist nationalism” but rather “universalist nationalism”. He insisted that the learner should socialise with their partners of other religions, other social groups and other countries and learn from them. That would help understand not only the anthropology of the society but also the problems of the country and how to help develop the country. The aim should be all round development of the individual personality through harmonious interaction and union of the learner with the environment. Prince Charles in his 2007 BBC World lecture elaborates on this in the new discipline: “Biomimetics” patronised by him.

He was worried about women’s education. In 1914 he wrote “If education is a tool for human development and if education is the birth right of a human being I do not understand how we can deprive the women from education (Streesiksha, Women’s education, 1914)”. “Same theoretical knowledge for both but practical work should be different” he continued. A ‘difference’ which will not be universally accepted to-day. He promoted women’s education in his school.

In an article on student discipline he dealt with relationship between the learner and the instructor. He would follow the old dictum: “Praptétu shorashé barshé putram mitrabat àcha ret” (treat the son at sixteen as a friend). Teacher should be friendly with the student. To be a good teacher, generosity and affection are more important characteristics than subject matter competence, he opined.

After he received the Nobel Prize in 1913 Tagore visited many countries including the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, France, Germany and Japan and studied in depth their systems of education. He found fault with the emphasis of too much nationalism on education which he found was one of the reasons of conflicts among nations and within the human race. Internationalisation of higher education got its root deeply in his heart. He wanted to set up an institution where different cultures and religions of the world and different streams of knowledge would meet. The foundation stone of Visva Bharati (the World University) was laid on 18
December, 1918. This leads us to the third phase of Tagore’s ideas on higher education.

The period of implementation (1919-1941)

He understood that to change the system of education he had to attack the brain of the system, the highest level. This was the rationale of establishing the Visva Bharati, the World University. He said:

“In every nation of the world, education is intimately related to the people. For us modern education has only trained employees, doctors, advocates and magistrates… This education has not touched the farmers, the potters, the artisans. No other educated society faced this kind of disaster. If we have to have a university it should, from the very beginning, create the knowledge base of the country’s economy, agriculture, health and all other subjects related to the country and the immediate village community because the university can be the nerve centre of the country. This knowledge base should utilise the most modern methods in agriculture, fishery, weaving and all related tasks” (Tagore’s speeches, Santiniketan, Visva Bharati, 1963)

Tagore gave a lot of emphasis on the universities to revitalise rural India. But that has to be done while creating new knowledge so that they do not become the warehouse of borrowed knowledge from abroad. He took special care to urge the instructors and researchers to engage in creative and inventive work. He became keen to develop international co-operation in education to make ‘Indianisation’ a success. He came to know that in the world of education pride and arrogance would marginalise the country. Sharing knowledge would augment capacity to adapt and help develop the country in its own way. He used to cite the Chinese traveller-educator Huen Sang who recorded the unique example of the universalistic spirit in Nalanda, Taxila and Vikramshila, the ancient universities of India. We should be happy to note that Nalanda is being recreated with the old spirit with international co-operation now.

Tagore not only recognised the importance of internationalisation, he practised it in Visva Bharati. In the same context Tagore wanted that the students of Visva Bharati acquire the qualities of European students: the urge to know, the will to study the laws of nature and use them to uplift the conditions of human race (Akankha, Ambition, Santiniketan Patrika, 1919). He emphasised on science and technology in the institutions of education and higher education. He was also interested in integrating instruction in science with Indian philosophy and religion. (Sikshar Milan, 1921). For him
science without spirituality would lead to eternal greed for material wealth leading in its turn to destruction of peace and oppression of the weak by the strong which he observed in the First World War. We are seeing the same problems as the negative effects of globalisation. His emphasis of moral and ethical education was in line with what Swami Vivekananda propagated just a little more than two decades earlier.

In his lecture on the functions of the university (Visva Vidyalayer Roop, The structure of a University, 1932) he said that the university has to assemble all the knowledge, develop them and disseminate them among the young generation for the benefit of the country. He was somewhat disappointed by the failure of Visva Bharati to apply its scientific knowledge base for the development of the rural area. He tried to realise that dream by setting up Sriniketan with the help of the British Agronomist Leonard Elmhirst for rural reconstruction. He brought specialists to work for rural development, experiment with new ideas so as to adapt them for local conditions. Agricultural and animal husbandry experiments were introduced. Students were trained in commerce and trade. 200 co-operatives were set up for agricultural credits to facilitate irrigation and agricultural developmental work. To integrate material development with spiritual development, varieties of cultural programmes were integrated into the educational programme. His practical educational programmes had to be a joyful exercise which would release creative and inventive energy of the learner (My educational mission, Modern Review June, 1931). The programmes of rural development today benefit from that experience.

To conclude, I would like to cite a poem of Tagore depicting his perspectives of a world of education:

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.
Let our UNESCO awake.

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