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EDITORIAL

## RABINDRANATH AND EDUCATION



It is astonishingly true that Rabindranath Tagore is regarded in this country 'as a literary genius but not seriously remembered as an educationist and rural reformer which he indeed was'. In this issue of *Science and Culture*, we will present articles related to his role as an educator to understand his philosophy and spirit which

were the cornerstones of the school he established in Santiniketan, later transformed into a university known as 'Visva Bharati' to impart education as a 'way of life'.

In her article "Rabindranath Tagore and Visva-Bharati", Uma Das Gupta, a noted historian, scholar and biographer of Rabindranath, digs into the poet's archive to characterize the spirit that led Rabindranath to establish the school on his own and his attempts to keep that spirit alive. India's great personalities ranging from Raja Rammohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, to Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda had all realized that the overwhelming problems of our country could only be solved by education and they talked about the nature of education that will be useful for our society and the country. Rabindranath and Vivekananda wrote volumes of essays on education and on the crisis that the society was facing at that time and deliberated on the nature of education we should follow. Amongst them, Rabindranath is the only person who experimented on education himself and established a school near Bolpur to impart education for 'common humanity, locally and globally'. Rabindranath's Santiniketan is undoubtedly one of the greatest experiments in holistic, value oriented education of the twentieth century, unaffiliated to any

organized religion. 'His idea was to offer an opportunity', as Das Gupta says, 'for people to work together in a common pursuit of truth by sharing humanity's common intellectual heritage'.

Following the model of an ancient hermitage or *gurukul*, Rabindranath started his school in the form of an *ashram* or more appropriately as *brahmacharyasram*. Realizing that students growing up in an atmosphere of inflexible rules are detrimental to his ideal of learning lessons joyfully and naturally, he changed the format of his educational system. In the second article of this issue, we will get a vivid description of the life at Santiniketan when Rabindranath was at the helm of affairs. Asha Mukul Das (b. 1902), in his article "Santiniketan: Learning from a Way of Life", writes of his stay in Santiniketan during the second decade of the twentieth century. He reminisces the idyllic simplicity, the friendliness and fun, learning to be responsible without imposed discipline, living in harmony with nature and with one another, being of peace with the silence within and the mystery of creation, the creative informality of the activities in the ashram, and how the entire flow of life was integrated and woven into the web of relationships that tied together Rabindranath, his family of teachers and students and the place. It articulates how Tagore's *Dakghar* or *Post Office* got staged and songs got written and added on even while the performance was ongoing. Values of life were naturally imbibed from the atmosphere of the place. I acknowledge with gratitude this article of Asha Mukul Das that was brought to my notice and fondly given to me by his son Professor Manas Mukul Das of Allahabad University with the permission to reproduce.

*Dak Ghar* was written by Rabindranath in 1912. But since an actor to play Amal was not available it was not staged prior to 1917. Meanwhile, it was translated into

English, titled “The Post Office” and staged at the initiative of W.B. Yeats in Dublin on 17th May, 1913 and London on 10th July, 1913 and Berlin and America in 1916. When Prasanta Mahalanabis told Rabindranath about Asha Mukul, he became interested.

Asha Mukul Das played the role of Amal in *Dakghar* when Rabindranath played the role of *Fakir* or *Sannyasi* and of *Prahari* (watchman). Gaganendranath was in the role of Madhav Datta, Abanindranath in the role of *Kabiraj* as well as of *Moral* while Santosh Kumar Mitra (later Asit Baran Halder) was in the role of curd seller. The play was staged at Jorasanko House before a distinguished gathering of political leaders assembled in Calcutta for the Indian National Congress presided over by Mrs Annie Besant. This historic event is well known and has been discussed many a times in different forms. But what is little known is that Rabindranath refused to stage *Dakghar* in later years without Asha Mukul Das in the role of Amal. In his own words, “in 1939, at the request of Indira Devi Chowdhurani and others Gurudev assented to stage *Dakghar* again. And, as such, parts were distributed and regular rehearsals went on before Gurudev, for quite a long time”. The final day of staging kept getting deferred several times till one day Rabindranath announced

“No, no! It won’t be staged.” Then after some time he softly said in a sad tone, addressing particularly the ashramites, “You don’t know him. There was a boy named Asha Mukul. You can’t do it as he did. So better leave it”.

The publication of these two articles is very timely and instructive in the context of overall deterioration of the atmosphere of current educational institutes, including Visva-Bharati. There is no doubt that the aim of education includes sharpening of learning skills and acquiring information and knowledge; but more importantly, it is supposed to provide empowerment, to think and act rationally, and to understand the fundamental values of life which help in the building of character. Unfortunately, most educational institutions today impart only a formal training in some selected subjects and the overall development of a student as a ‘human being’ is overlooked. Schools, colleges and universities which are supposed to be a place of peace and tranquillity, dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, have turned into places of violence and

breeding place of political nuisance. The time has come, in our opinion, to assess the value of education in the present day pedagogic world which is full of corruption, intrigues, unhealthy competition and compromise, indiscipline and chaos. We need to also introspect whether today’s Visva-Bharati still stands as an epitome of the philosophies and spirits of its founder, whether it may still be considered as an oasis of peace amidst the political and chaotic existence of educational institutions.

The value of education is mostly conceptual and therefore is subject to debate and controversy. The value of life varies with religion and culture, and may be different in different countries. However there are some values which are universal and non-controversial—like truthfulness, love, peace, appreciation of good qualities in others, equality, justice etc. These values may mostly be traced to religious and spiritual discourses which have been expressed through mythological stories and literatures of various forms.

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There are other values that are ‘transient’—values which change with time. Many of these values evolve or are legally enforced to lessen social inequalities or injustice. For instance, the shameful practice of *sati* was once commonly accepted, and it took considerable debate and discourses to outlaw this traditional custom. Other transient values are superficial, focussing mostly on personal comfort, style, etiquette and manners to impress others, such as the new culture of western materialism. In today’s world what we observe is the dominance of the second kind.

Former president Zakir Hussain had once remarked “for over a century now religious instruction has been systematically excluded from our organised education, and what is called modernism and sometimes liberalism, has looked upon religious people and religious ideas with lofty condescension”. Growing estrangement from religious ideas is considered to be one of the sources for present day disregard of human and moral values. He continued, “Education does precious little to correct this and no effort

is made to distinguish between the religion that seeks to divide humanity into warring camps and religion that gives meaning to life and lends eternity to its moments". In my personal opinion, reading of classical literary works and lives of great men is important to attune life with love, beauty, art and respect to humanity which eventually help in building character and in dealing with the challenges of life honestly. Rabindranath once wrote that "Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott had a strong influence over our family". It is important to include humanities, science and social science in all the courses students take.

Truly speaking, we have inherited the modern education system from the British Raj which was aimed at producing clerks and bureaucrats to suit their needs and aspirations. We have restructured our education system with this colonial system at the base, stressing more on our students to inculcate elitist values like competitive spirit, individual excellence, decorum and style, and less on fostering values which are truly Indian in nature. No serious attempt has been made to shake the root of this system and change it to suit the needs of Indian masses. According to Rabindranath, "a true Indian education must implement its acquired knowledge of economics, agriculture, health, and all other everyday sciences in the surrounding villages; then alone can that education become the centre of the country's way of living." Swami Vivekananda also opined, "What we want are western sciences coupled with Vedanta, Brahmacharya as the guiding motto, and also Shraddha and faith in one's own self." It is time to reconsider the opinions expressed by great personalities like Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and others and examine how relevant those are in the present age and how much we can follow.

In his article "Science temper in literature" Rabindra Kumar Bhattacharya, a noted mathematician, explored Rabindranath's science temper imprinted in his literature and tried to identify how Rabindranath's science temper had impacted his life and creativity. According to the author, Rabindranath's upbringing in the environment of Upanishads, his own interest in science culminated with his association with scientists like J.C. Bose, P.C. Ray, C.V. Raman, P.C. Mahalanobis, S.N. Bose in India and Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell and others from abroad, his frequent foreign travels and most importantly his desire to understand nature and cosmos altogether has shaped his mind and thoughts.

The article "Tagore: His wonderful world of paintings" contributed by Gopa Datta Bhaumik, Professor of Bengali and a noted educationist, is an interesting article which reveals the spirit behind Rabindranath's paintings of many forms. The author remarked that painting was an essential part of Rabindranath's self revelation and it indeed unveils his interaction with the contemporary world. His paintings are symbols of eternal youth present in a venerable personality and his two thousand five hundred paintings are vibrant with freshness and diversity but always expressed originality. Rabindranath's drawing of doodles in his manuscripts is a unique medium of art and according to Rabindranath "when the scratches in my manuscript cried, like sinners, for salvation and assailed my eyes with the ugliness of their irrelevance", he took time in rescuing them into a merciful finality of rhythm instead of the ongoing task.

Music has been an integral part of Indian culture for centuries. Musicologists classified Indian music into four periods: Vedic (upto 1000 BCE.), Ancient (1000 BCE to 800 CE), Middle (800 to 1800 CE) and Modern (after 1800 CE). Understanding the science of music was seriously pursued in nineteenth century by Helmholtz and others. The book "The Sensations of Tone" authored by Helmholtz influenced CV Raman to an extent that he started analysing the science behind the music produced by Tabla and violin. We present here an article on Science and Music with a special Note on Helmholtz. Janus Jeans to Pandit Ravi Shankar by Arun Kumar Biswas who is a metallurgist by profession but is better known as a man of history of science. In his own words, this article is his sixty years' memorabilia 'replete with the scientific-musical memories of the author'. His article is a scientific analysis of music which touched our great Indian leaders, on the music of Rabindranath and Vivekananda and Ravi Shankar and their attempts to understand and analyse the rhythm of music.

You must have realized by now that the issue of *Science and Culture* that you are holding in your hands is of a very different style, taste and nature. All the articles are so rich in content, history and relevance that they will appeal to all classes of readership of the journal, while serious readers will preserve the issue as reference material; we are tempted to call it a 'Collector's Edition'. □

S. C. Roy

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**We deeply mourn the sudden demise of Shri Samarjit Kar  
Editorial Advisor of *Science and Culture* on July 5, 2013.**