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A Study of Unique features of Tagore's school at Shantiniketan and his untraditional ideas in Educational system

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore is the unique example in the world as he was versatile enough to step into almost all fields of human experience. In 1988 Debendranath Tagore dedicated the land and buildings towards establishment of a Brahmavidyalaya. Rabindranath's school Brahmacharyasrama which started functioning formally from December 22, 1901 with no more than five students on the roll, was in part, a fulfilment of the wishes of his father who was a considerable figure of his time in the field of educational reforms. Tagore's ideas on education of children were realized in the Shantiniketan in his own time. His effort on the formation of the school at Shantiniketan was to turn a place of unconventional learning and universal harmony. His school was decidedly different in every way from the conventional one. This article intends to epitomize the historical background of Tagore's school at Shantiniketan and explores the unique features of his school.

Key words: Unique features, untraditional Ideas, Shantiniketan, Educational system, epitomize

Introduction: Rabindranath Tagore was not a pedagogist in the traditional sense, Rabindranath's educational ideas are reflected in his various essays on education, speeches delivered on different occasions and private letters. His earliest educational writing is Shikshar Herpher (Education and Incongruities in 1892). His book entitled "Education" (Shiksha), includes twenty-two articles relating to different aspects of education and these were written in between 1905-1936. All his educational ideas mainly developed through his critiques of the then education system and from his own observed experiences while running Shantiniketan (1901), Visva-Bharati (1921) and Sriniketan (1922) as learning centre. Tagore's ideas about the education of children have mostly been realised and are regularly being realised in his own creation, Shantiniketan.

The school founded by Rabindranath Tagore is known as the 'Path-Bhavana' today. The school completed hundred years of its existence in 2001. It draws students from all over the state of West Bengal and remains a reputed institution. However, the school had a rather modest beginning. In December, 1901, Tagore started the school with only five students; one of them was his own son, Rathindranath Tagore. By the beginning of the twentieth century Tagore had already become a reputed poet. Why then did he think of starting a school at Bolpur.

The Historical Background- Rabindranath founded the Shantiniketan School in his father's Ashram in 1901. The Ashram had been started way back in 1863 when Debendranath Tagore bought twenty acres of land from Bhubanmohan Sinha, landlord of Raipur in the southern Bengal district of Birbhum. He built a guest-house on that land and called it 'Shantiniketan' (The Adobe of Peace), and the place came to be called by the same name. It became an Ashram by a Deed of Trust in 1888 to enable householders from all religions and backgrounds to spend time in prayer and meditation away from their domestic responsibilities. Rabindranath obtained his father's permission to start a school in the Ashram as the first step in implementing his idea of a new Indian education, (Das Gupta, 2004). The school was situated in the heart of nature but not too far from a big city. Started in 1901 with five boys and five teachers, the school was called the Brahmacharya (a life of abstinence and discipline during student life) Ashram. After the first year the name was changed to Brahmavidyalaya.

If we go through Tagore's comprehensive work on education, a crucial question naturally arises as what is there in the background behind the foundation of his Shantiniketan School. Surprisingly, if we understand the background to this effect, many answers emerge. To explain the background behind the foundation of the school, Tagore himself wrote: "I must confess it is



difficult for me to say, 'what is the idea which underlies my institution', For this sort of idea was not like a fixed foundation upon which a building could be erected. It is, in fact, more like a seed which cannot be separated from its plant. And I know what it was to which this school owes its origin. It was not any new theory of education, but the memory of my school-days (Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality*, MacMillan & Co.. 1933).

The Shantiniketan School was really an answer to his childhood grief. Tagore's own unfortunate experiences as a child in a city school in Calcutta left an indelible impression on his mind. We know from his 'Reminiscences' how unhappy he was with the kind of schools he was sent to in his childhood. He wrote in his 'Reminiscences':

"The rooms were cruelly dismal with their walls on ground like police man. The houses were more like a pigeonholed box than a human habitation. No decoration, no picture, not a touch of colour, not an attempt to attract the child's mind" (Rabindranath Tagore, *Reminiscences*, Visva-Bharati, 1961: 60-61)."

The painful experiences of his school life, kept such a permanent imprint on his mind that even after forty years he could vividly describe the humiliation to which he was subjected. Later on he stated in his own words:

"We had to sit like specimens of some museum while lessons were pelted on us from high like hail storms on flowers"(Chakraborty, Amiya (ed.), *A Tagore Reader*, Boston: Beacon Press)

In choosing Shantiniketan he would have looked for a place where his children could grow amid nature, beyond the restrictions of urban living. He strongly believed that only in the lap of the mother-nature a dream could bloom with a promise of colourful petals.

He again wrote in 'A Poet's School'

"The founding of my school had its origin in the memory of that longing for freedom which seems to go back beyond the sky-line of my birth" (Rabindranath Tagore, *Boundless Sky*, 1964: 238).

In December 1901 a school with a modest boarding house was started by Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan with the object of providing, as reported by the *Visva-Bharati Bulletin* of January 1924, to a number of children the kind of education which would not be divorced from life, where pupils would become members of a larger family and regard the affairs of the institution as their own, and where they would live and grow in an atmosphere of freedom, mutual trust and happiness.

The school was to be residential in character and more or less modelled after the ancient hermitage schools of great sages of India, with simple leaf-grass thatched cottages for residence and open air classes under the trees. Das Gupta (1983) opined that emphasis on Indian culture was 'strong in early Shantiniketan modelled on the forest schools of old hermitage. Immensely impressed by the tapavana system of education of ancient India, he wanted to follow the Ashram-ideal of education at the Shantiniketan school.

All these factors might have prompted Rabindranath to found his residential school in Bolpur, The school owed its origin to the ideas of Rabindranath, but he did not have any practical experience about the management of the school. Fortunately there were people who evinced keen of interest in the school and who came forward to help him at the initial stage. Prominent among them were Brahmabandhav Upadhaya and Rewachand. Rewachand joined the school as a teacher. Upadhyay did not teach but he used to visit Shantiniketan frequently and supervised the school and advised the founder. Soon it started to grow. Students from different walks of life and even other states of the country came to join the institution. In 1925 this Ashram school was named as "Patha-Bhavana". What we know as Visva-Bharati was begun with the Brahmacharya Vidyalaya. Which we know as Shantiniketan.



Uniqueness in Tagore's School- Rabindranath's school had some specific aspects to mark its difference from the conventional ones. The important feature that makes the school different from others is its open air classes with nature as surroundings. Classes were held in open air in the shade of trees where man and nature entered into an immediate harmonious relationship.

The development of self-governance is an important component in Tagore's total education of students at Bolpur Tagore established the Ashram Sammalani ie. Self-government with an objective to develop holistic personality of students. It was formed from the students through election. The main aim to form such association was to help students learn to carry out responsibilities in various matters of the school administration and thus be self-dependent and make their life in the Ashram happy and well disciplined. There are seven departments or Vibhagh under this association to look into different matters. They are Sahitya Vibhagh, Sasta Vibhagh, Parivesh Vibhagh, Kidra Vibhagh, Seba Vibhagh, Aaharjho Vibhagh and Sakha Sangha. These collaborative efforts help in developing decision-making, self-discipline and self-respect in children.

A life of simplicity was the cardinal principle of Tagore's school. Teachers and students shared the single socio-cultural life. The Shantiniketan School was conceived to be more than a school, a society in itself where teacher and pupil, house-holder and visitors all live as neighbours. Tagore wanted children to feel the meaning of co-operation and friendship from the beginning, The co-existence of boys and girls in a single educational set up was quite a new thing in India, then. Almost after a decade a girls came to the Brahmavidyalaya in 1908. In 1922 a separate section for girls was organized. The girls and boys were given the same courses to study but there was a difference in certain assigned activities. The girls were given the responsibility of looking after the younger boys in the children's section and also of attending the sick children.

The guard against any national prejudice among the students was a landmark aspect of Tagore's school. Rabindranath invited lecturers from Europe and distant western countries to his school. Their proximity to the foreign teachers helped them to cross the so-called nationalistic feeling and to embrace things of distant origin. In his school his students got through their early training freedom from the barriers of country, caste, creeds, race and prejudices. He believed that an open and happy education from a young age, in an environment of being with others from early on in life, would cure society of division and strife (Das Gupta, 2004: 22).

The other very important aspect in the school was freedom. The idea of freedom was used creatively in the Shantiniketan School. Tagore was against any form of corporal punishment to impose discipline. He wanted discipline to come from within, from the pursuit of noble and high ambitions in life. In this connection Tagore wrote:

"My idea was that education should be a part of life itself and must not be detached from it and be made into something abstract. And so when I brought these children around me, I allowed them to live a complete life. They had perfect freedom to do what they wished, as much liberty as possible, as was possible for me to give them and in all their activities I tried to put before them something which would be interesting to them I tried to arouse their interests in all things, in nature's beauty and the surrounding villages and also in literature, through play-acting, through listening to music in a natural manner, not through merely class teaching" (Rabindranath Tagore, My School, The Modern Review Journal, 1931).

In keeping with his theory of subconscious learning. Rabindra Nath never talked or wrote down to the students, but rather involved them with whatever he was writing or composing. The students were allowed access to the room where he read his writings to teachers and critics, and they were encouraged to read out their writings in special literary evenings. In teaching also he believed in presenting difficult levels of literature, which the students might not fully grasp but which would stimulate them. The highest education, according to Tagore, is that "which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence" (Rabindranath



Tagore, My School, published in Personality, MacMillan & Co. 1933). He considered education as an inspiration and emphasized the need for drawing out the potentialities instead of pouring information (Bhattacharya, 2012).

Reaching out to a larger humanity was essential to Tagore's educational endeavour at Brahmacharya Vidyalaya. The Shantiniketan Ashram was surrounded by villages. The students of Santiniketan rendered service to the society they lived in. They also took part in the village work connected with the school. They contributed their knowledge of scientific and latest means of cultivation and of fighting diseases. That was the way to serve the purpose of education by living a complete life.

Conclusion- Shantiniketan School represents education of intellect, mind, body and feeling. Tagore's educational experiments at Shantiniketan School were ground-breaking in many ways. He was one of the first in India to argue for a humane educational system that was in touch with the environment and aimed at overall development of the personality. He also felt an inner surging urge to occupy himself in some worthwhile service to mankind in which his spirituality would find fulfilment. Its unique features are co-curricular activities, integral socio-cultural life of students and teachers, development of an unbiased attitude towards life, open-air classes, and training on self-governance, education in and through activity, freedom in education and delight in education. Shantiniketan represents education of the mind, heart and soul. Visva- Bharati stands for education of the intellect, meeting place of the East and the West, national integration and international amity, Shriniketan represents education of hand. The three institutions combined make education complete and total.

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