



Tagore's *My School*- Nurturing Bio-ethical 'Inclusivism' and Environmental Empathy.

Ayanita Banerjee (Ph.D). Fellow of Social Studies Research Council, USA.

University of Engineering and Management.

New-Town. Kolkata-152

Visiting Fellowship. University of Religion and Denominations. Iran

Abstract: To perceive the human world in co-existence with nature and to nurture freedom and constructive processes we need to rethink the transformative literature of Rabindranath Tagore, who explored an eco-critical vision of identification with the immediate environment. The paper highlighting the evolution of nature's impetus on Tagore, *envisions the divine bliss in celebrating the bio-centric unity against the anthropocentric dominance*. The Ecocentrics responsiveness to the bliss of the natural beauty had always evoked a profound sense of human intimacy and friendship with nature and its myriad life-forms. Tagore's *My School* celebrating the 'bio-ethical inclusivism' of man and nature propagates environmental empathy through his soulful participation in nature's plentitude and beauty, singing and dancing with joy and blissful spirit. It shows the extent to which humans and the environment are interdependent. This multidisciplinary drive of research applied to sustainability, therefore, stems from the awareness of an interconnected world. Tagore, who had been an eco-literary artist before the coinage of the term, always had felt the necessity of re-conceptualizing nature not as an object of mere observation or interpretation, but as an active agency in its own right. Tagore celebrating his harmony with the music of nature, with the melodies coming from the murmur of the rushing water, from the bird's songs and from the rustling leaves enter into a deep communion with nature's grand festival. E.J. Thompson rightly

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concludes that Tagore's power of self-identification with nature "remains the greatest gift possessed by an individual". (Thompson, 1921)

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, man-nature symbiotic relationship, bio-ethical inclusivism, environmental empathy.*

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore, an outstanding nature writer, philosopher and naturalist remains the pioneer of modern environmentalism celebrated even to this day. *My School* being one of Tagore's masterpieces is a work of monumental pre-eminence nurturing the bio-ethical co-existence of man and nature alike. Critiquing anthropocentrism and thereby recognizing the intrinsic value of nature had always remained the central praxis of Tagore's literary endeavor. This paper intends to analyze the geneses of ecological ethics and thoughts embedded in *My School*, highlighting Tagore's conception of selfless freedom nurtured through the lens of ecological ethics. Nature endowed with its intrinsic value nurtures the bio-ethical inclusivism between human and nature, fostering prosperity and development of the whole ecosphere. Tagore advocating the life of freedom and humane morality attaches importance to the principles of bio-diverse simplicity, eco-centric equality and higher laws. These principles constitute the cornerstone of modern ecologic ethics contributing to the spiritual growth of individuals and the sustainable development of ecosphere. Tagore intending to make the theoretical survey of the ecological ethics, self-realization and bio-centric equality promotes an ecological holism through the union of "perfect sympathy" (Tagore and Elmhirst, 1961) involving our imaginative ability to feel one with nature opening out to everything around us with 'a radiant and an ever spreading love'. Thus the "bit of colour in nature, the note of song and the call of love which is only a call and never a demand" (Tagore and Elmhirst, 1961) foster a mutual and perfect relation of bio-ethical inclusivism between man and nature.

Textual Analysis

Nature, for Tagore reflected the feeling of an un-bound freedom in solitude, meditating the pleasures of escaping society and the petty things that society entails upon. Reflecting on his intense companionship with nature, Tagore reminiscences on how freedom echoed the keynote of his nostalgic memoirs:

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We in our home sought freedom of power in our language, freedom of imagination in our literature, freedom of soul in our religious creed and that of mind in our natural environment. (Tagore and Elmhirst, 1961).

Thus, man endowed with this gift of memory, establishes with the environment mnemonic relationships, from recollections to oblivion. Memory protecting the human recollections from the past events enables man to remember the perceptions and feelings experienced during his personal or collective circumstances. Starting from this perspective, reflection proposed on how memory as a tool and measure of human knowledge offers solution to both the problem of sustainability and to the development of processes remain based on shared values. In Tagore's *Jibansmriti*, the concept of memory includes things or objects as they store knowledge, meanings and memories to be discovered in the drilling of the time machine. Since his infancy, the variegated memory recollections of young Tagore remain to be the material through which he gradually decodes and re-builds time and space "tingling with the consciousness of the world around nature and the humans." (Tagore, 2002).

The sad demise of his mother at an early age, bereft the world of young Tagore with joy and freedom. Since his infancy, the places of his memory starting to outline his mental maps, build reference systems on environmental factors affecting the child's perception. Reared under the strict vigilance of the house servants, young Tagore was caged "in a circle drawn with a chalk to suppress the right of free movement." (Tagore, 2002). Fortunately for the child the circle drawn near the window provided him the magnanimous view of the nature's opulence with "ducks playing in the water hunting for food, the people gossiping and basking in the sun, busy plucking fruits and flowers." (Tagore, 2002). The few coconut trees growing like some war captives of this earth whispered to him "the eternal companionship with the great brotherhood of trees offered to man." (Tagore and Elmhirst, 1961). But to his utter dismay the "thin shrill cry of the high flying kite in the biting sun of a dazed Indian mid-day only signaled a dumb distant kinship to this solitary boy." (Tagore, 2002) The banished soul of the child "sitting in the civilized isolation of the town life cried for the enlargement of the horizon." (Tagore and Elmhirst, 1961). His mind thirsted "to float upon a large feeling of the blue sky to mingle with the brown earth in its glistening grass." (Tagore and Elmhirst, 1961). But his pensive mood dawned upon him the realization that "nature was free and I was bound-there was no way of our meeting." (Tagore, 2002). Hence, regardless of the way or ways we choose to describe reality, in terms of complexities or "simplicities" (Berthoz, 2011) the reality is



created through relationships and interconnections. Amongst these relationships, man-nature interconnection becomes the centripetal force weaving mnemonic relationships with the reality manifested in terms of heritage and nature.

The exiled life of young Tagore intimately throbbed for his reunion with the earth, water, foliage and the blue sky. His passionate love for nature inspiring within him “an intimate companionship with the musical touch of the seasons in the air”, (Tagore,2002) reflected his wistful childhood yearning to run from his own self and be freely united with every particle in nature. However, his union with nature came through the profound realization of the “harmony of relationships realized in this world -not through the feeling by senses or knowing by reason, but through the union of perfect sympathy.” (Tagore and Elmhirst, 1961). This perception of the union with nature thereby remains not a matter of mere intellectual knowledge, rather it involves our imaginative ability to feel one with nature and to open out to everything around us with ‘a radiant and an ever spreading love:

wherever there is a bit of colour in nature, a note of song there comes the call of love which is only a call and never a demand. (Tagore and Elmhirst, 1996)

Thus the sublimity in nature’s creation never insults our freedom, raising its fingers to make us acknowledge its sovereignty. On the contrary, it instills us to stoop down “to offer reverence to the magnitude of nature’s creations inherent in earth, water, fire and trees and in everything moving and growing.” (Tagore and Elmhirst,1996)

Tagore’s essays such as “The Modern Age”, “Civilization and Progress”, “The Philosophy of Leisure” and “The Educational Mission of Visva-Bharati” depict poet’s critical indignation towards the utilitarian ‘progress’ beginning to occupy more of energy and attention to “aspire for a life of material fulfillment and callousness of luxury.” (Tagore and Elmhirst,1996). Materialistic progress, as Tagore envisages tries to identify the inviolable laws of nature. The modern city-built civilization serving the pragmatic purposes of man remain indignant to the tastes of “colour, music, and movements lying at the heart of nature.” (Tagore,2002). Modern men digressed from the orbit of his normal life survives under the constant pressure of the artificial contraventions imprisoning him within the ‘stony hearted city’ divorced from the harmony with nature. David Harvey associating modernity with capitalism and its evolution (Harvey,1993) states that the aligned developments of the technological progress lead to the establishment of our consumerism-based Western culture distancing man from nature and the cosmos. Furthermore, Marcel Gauchet defining



technological upheaval as the “disillusionment of the world” (Gauchet, 1992) states that modern man exercising his anthropocentric willingness to dominate nature willfully rejects the primitive ethnocentric bonding in pursuit of gaining material efficacy. Heidegger renaming the earnest quest of the anthropocene’s ‘homelessness’, (Heidegger, 1976) defines the thirst as a tiring pursuit by the human- beings echoing with deep concern the assault of the industry-oriented life over the nature-oriented rural ways of survival.

Bio-Incluvism and Environmental Empathy

Consciousness rising in the environmental issues play an important role in understanding man’s position in the ecosphere. The ecosystem being immensely complex, the question of human attitudes conducive in preserving the integrity stability and beauty of nature is worth analyzing. Donald Worster rightly concludes that the cause of the ecological crisis is not worked by the ecosystem, but by our ethical senses. To remove the crisis, we need to formulate *Ecological Ethics* discussing the human rights and obligations with respect to the rights of nature, natural values and morality on nature. Leopold, one of the core founders of *Ecological Ethics* promoting *Ecological Holism* inspires mankind to judge all things from the perspective interest of nature’s “ecological restoration” to deconstruct the hierarchical notion of culture/nature and consequently reconstruct the human/nature relationship. Tagore, critiquing modern civilization built on the “store-house of things at the loss of the background of the great universe” (Tagore, 1999) traces back the distinctiveness of Indian culture rooted in the forests. His essay “The Religion of the Forest” consciously encourages the stream of Indian civilization developing into a syncretic, non-violent society evolving within the benign environment of the forest to minimize the connectedness with the outside world.

Tagore, a teacher-educator of uncompromising and radical vision likewise makes a significant and unique contribution to the Indian educational philosophy. Protesting the imperialist, commercial and parochial patchwork of the modern educational system, Tagore’s educational philosophy remains firmly embedded in the soil of his country and the world in its larger context. Deeply pained with the tragic atmosphere of ‘our city-built education’ imparted in the prison walls of *harinvarir prachir*, Tagore’s *Achalaytan* (1911) remains a strong indictment to our ethico-religious and educational system rendered lifeless, dry and sterile through its over-emphasizing rules for rules’ sake. Mahapanchak’s *Achalaytan* representing a quest for dry wisdom turns into a petrified land of illusion and immobility. Panchak the image



of joyful bounty and freedom in life stands in contrast to Mahapanchak the pillar of rigidity and conservatism. The inner voice of Mahapanchak guided by ‘artificial culture’ urges to insist on strict discipline and observance of institutional rules: “life of human being is but insignificant and trivial, but the customs are eternal.” (Tagore, 2005). He symbolizes the spirit of ‘artificial bondage’ and is thereby anti-nature. On the contrary, Panchak striking a note of discord to the fossilized and orthodox institutional conventions present spirited dynamism to win over stagnated immobility. The imprisoned caged walls of the institution are social constructions, isolating and alienating man from the fertility of the nature. The act of razing down the walls of *Achalaytan* by Acharyadev at the end of the play reaffirms the acclaimed victory of nature over culture.

True education should not be a mere routine execution of learning snatching the “helpless creature from the heart of Nature, closing him in the prison house, feeling sure that imprisonment is the surest method of improvement.” (Tagore, 1933). In his first public lecture on the subject *Sikshar Herpher* (Vicissitudes of Education) Tagore pointed to this excessive utilitarian bias and total joylessness in education “balyakal hoite amader sikshar sahit ananda nai.” (Tagore, 1972). Traditional school, he states is nothing but a knowledge factory churning out students “molded into the desired products for being examined and graded.” (Tagore and Elmhirst, 1961). The inner wailing of a learner pressed between the so-called disciplines imposed upon at random in the form of bookish learning and disassociation from nature finds a telling revelation in his satirical drama *Totakahini*. In the allegory, a bird sings joyously all day, but never recites scriptures. The Raja decides for its education and likewise the pundits are summoned. After much deliberation the pundits decide that the ignorance of the bird comes from its living in the nature’s nest. They immediately replace the nest with a golden cage. The learned pundits with text books in one-hand and baton in the other, started to instruct the poor bird with “what may be fitly called lessons.” (Tagore, 2005). The Raja interfering to note the bird’s progress is reaffirmed that the instructive method has proved so impressive that the bird looks ridiculously unimportant by comparison. The untiring teaching module finally leaves the little creature lifeless, unable to neither ‘whistle nor whisper’ as its voice gets “completely choked with leaves from the books.” (Tagore, 2005). Finally, when the bird is brought before the king, its tender body only reveals the “rustle of the inner stuffing of the book-leaves- while

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outside the window the murmur of the spring breeze amongst the newly budded *asoka* leaves made April morn wistful.” (Tagore, 2005).

The above storyline reminds us of the ‘history of the present’ as discussed by Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault like Tagore looked at the educational institutions on the models of prisons or factories with his idea of a ‘microphysics of power’ of a disciplinary mechanism involving continuous observation or surveillance, training and punishment-the whole process of discipline that ‘constitutes’ the individual’s conduct, habits and thinking and ‘which has the function of reducing gaps’ and ‘impose homogeneity. (Foucault, 1949). Tagore in a similar fashion condemned the prevalent mode of education aiming to transform an individual to a machine-made product possessing homogenous or uniform character, but devoid of humane potentials. Critiquing the strategic methodology of the present day educational institutions he comments that they indulge in a blind and stereotyped process of instruction and the students become helpless victims of this terrible mechanization:

have not our books like most of our necessities come between us and our world.
We have got into the habit of covering the windows of our minds with their
pages and plasters of book-phrases have stuck into our mental skin making it
impervious to all touches of truth. (Tagore, 1933)

Consequently, such education brings no message of joy and freedom to the learners and thereby serves no individual interests and potentials.

Interpreting Tagore’s Educational Theory in the Contemporary Scenario

Education according to Tagore should thrive in a spontaneous atmosphere where learning becomes a matter of joy, where everything sustains the learners’ interests, serves his spiritual need to understand and appreciate and provides food for his mental nourishment and growth. Obviously this education cannot be achieved within the four walls of an academic institution “by somehow gobbling food within nine-thirty and ten hours and rushing to give attendance within the caged walls-*harinvari* of learning.” (Tagore, 1961). Tagore urges to pull down the walls of the caged house ‘*harinvari*’ inspiring growth ‘amidst the wide beautiful expanse of nature in the universe.’ The unending quest for the essence of knowledge and erudition in association with nature is the *sine qua non* of Tagorean educational philosophy. With a view of ensuring the individual learner to find out the best in him, and to be critical and

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creative from every aspect of erudition, Tagore emphasized education for emancipation of sympathy and harmony of the human mind:

I cannot help believing that my Indian ancestry has left deep in my being the legacy of its philosophy which speak of fulfillment through a harmony with all things. For good or evil such a harmony has the effect of arousing a great desire for freedom in us not in this man-made world but in the depth of the universe. (Tagore, 1961)

Freedom for growth, experiment, enterprise and adventure are all coordinated with the progress of the “imaginative mind of man which like the lamp of Aladdin endows him the power to create a new world fashioned by him.” (Tagore, 1961). Tagore’s “My School” traces its origin in the longing memory for that ‘imaginative freedom’, which goes beyond the skyline of his birth. Poignantly experienced in his own life by being deprived of the kinship with Nature and her mesmeric components Tagore deeply feels the need of education for freedom amidst nature’s own beauty:

waiting from a time immemorial with her varied gifts of colours and dances, flowers and fruits, with the joy of her mornings and the peace of her starry nights. (Tagore, 2002)

Tagore’s experimentations on education are in fact based on his own childhood experiences almost crushed in the ‘hydraulic pressure’ of the caged education imparted in caged institutions. Recollecting the tortures of his school days he states:

what we were taught there we never understood, nor did we make any attempt to learn. The rooms were cruelly dismal with their walls on guard like policemen. The house was more like a pigeon-holed box than a human habitation. No decoration, no pictures, not a touch of colour nor any attempt was made to attract the boyish heart. Naturally our whole being was depressed as we stepped through its doorway into the narrow quadrangle-and playing truant became chronic with us. (Tagore, 1933)

The restless and pulsating movements of children in an ideal atmosphere of nature and freedom were thus revived in his institution:

I established my institution in a beautiful spot far away from the town where the children had the greatest freedom under the shade of ancient trees and the field open to the verge of the horizon. (Tagore, 1953)

Tagore harps on to return to the old ashramic pattern of education where the pursuit of teaching and learning takes place amidst ‘a living and active bond of necessity.’ He advocated the need of incorporating a common-life in simplicity and austerity among students “in an atmosphere of service offered to all creatures, tending trees, feeding birds, cultivating kindness and growing in spirit with their teachers’ own spiritual growth.” (Tagore, 1961). The ideal of education

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realized through sharing a life of high aspiration with one's own master help in attaining the fullest growth and freedom of soul. Such emancipation of the soul can truly be witnessed among men devoid of book learning and living in absolute poverty. True education should unfurl before us the treasure of this "spiritual knowledge and offer it to the rest of the world as our contribution for its eternal welfare." (Tagore, 1933).

"To be natural with nature and human with human society" (Tagore, 1933) remains the core essence of Tagore's educational philosophy. In *Sikshar Herpher* Tagore states that the purpose of education is to acquire the ability to enter the world of nature. This world says Tagore, is essential to give us life, strength, health and keep us vital by ceaselessly breaking in our senses. In his essay "A Poet's School" he elaborates further upon this theme, emphasizing the need to develop an empathetic sense of interconnectedness with the surrounding world:

We have come to this world to accept it, not merely to know it. We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy. The highest education is that which does not give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence. But we find that this education for sympathy is not only systematically ignored in our schools, but it is severely repressed. From our very childhood habits are formed and knowledge is imparted in such a manner that our life is weaned away from nature and our mind and the world are set in opposition from the beginnings of our days. (Tagore, 1961)

The children with the freshness of their senses are gifted to come in direct intimacy with this world and "must accept it naked and simple and never lose their power of immediate communion with it." (Tagore, 1933). Tagore therefore urges to nurture the sub-conscious mind of the child and sustain it amidst a living atmosphere of nature to stimulate his creative and critical excellence independently:

the children have their active sub-conscious mind, which, like the tree, has the power to gather its food from the surrounding atmosphere. The atmosphere is more important to them than rules and methods, building appliances, class teachings and textbooks. (Tagore, 1961)

His own school *Siksha-Satra* fondly christened by him as *A Poet's School* aims to deal with the "over-flowing abundance of child life, its charm and simplicity to provide the utmost liberty within the surroundings filled with the creative possibilities for self-expression." (Tagore, 1961). The atmosphere of independent creation and independent judgement '*swadhin sristi o swadhin vichar*' was exercised in his endeavour at excellence in education. Tagore tried to develop in his school the feeling of freshness for nature and "a sensitiveness of freedom in relationship with the natural surroundings." (Tagore, 1961). Children were made to enjoy



ample scope for direct communion with Nature and participate in practical and living education spontaneously:

Records are kept and reports and accounts are written up, revised and corrected giving scope for literary training in its most interesting form. Geology becomes the fertility of the plot; chemistry the use of lime and manures; physics the use of tools, of pumps, the study of water-lifts and oil-engines; entomology the control of plant-pests (ants, caterpillars, beetles) and diseases (leaf-curl, wilt and bacterial attacks); ornithology the study of bird in their relation, first to garden plot and then to the world in general.” (Tagore, 1961)

Thus Nature study in *Siksha -Satra* gets “transformed into the study of Nature in relation to life and the daily experiences of life.” (Tagore, 1961) In his essay, “My School” Tagore writes:

fortunately for me I was brought up in a family where literature, music and art had become instinctive. My brother and cousins lived in the freedom of ideas and most of them had natural artistic powers. Nourished in these surroundings I began to think early and to dream and to put my thoughts into expressions. (Tagore, 1961)

To channelize education in perfect collaboration with Nature Tagore presented in his school an ideal atmosphere for nurturing creative and aesthetic efflorescence “in the open air, under the shade of trees; to learn music and picture making; to enact dramatic performances; and activities that were expressions of life.” (Tagore, 1961). He writes that “we felt we would try to test everything and no achievement seemed impossible. We wrote, we sang, we acted, and we poured ourselves out on every side.” (Tagore, 1961). Nature benevolently provided “the most commodious and helpful out-of-door workshops for learners stimulating fields for experiencing and experimenting with life.” (Tagore, 1961). The sharing of common life with the tillers of the soil and the humble workers not only enriched the tender minds but also broadened them. It made no discrimination between the rich and the poor, high or low. Hence Tagore’s plea for the growth of liberal attitude in the learner’s mind was encouraged by the vast abundance in nature, presenting itself in magnanimous and beautiful ways. The varied spectacle of nature with its sounds, smells and colours stimulated the imaginative and the critical thinking of the learners to combat the boredom of their mechanical learning.

Conclusion

In Tagore’s educational thought it followed that one of the most important roles of nature was to provide a source of freedom for the child’s growth and regeneration. Rational training through books should be secondary to erudition from direct experiences in nature.

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Tagore felt that curriculum should evolve organically around nature with classes held in the open air to provide spontaneous appreciation of the plants and animal kingdoms and seasonal changes. Nature walks and excursions should be made a part of the curriculum and the students ought to be encouraged to follow the life-cycles of insects, birds and plants. Class schedules should be made flexible to accommodate shifts in the weather and special attention must be given to various natural phenomenon. Tagore concerned with the environment from an early age created ceremonies to propagate ecological awareness among students.

The vision of Tagore as teacher-seer reflected above unfolds the serene objective of education for the advancement of growth and efflorescence of the inner personality in each and every learner. Tagore's educational principles nurtured in an ideal atmosphere of nature and freedom serves as a fruitful and significant guide to re-orient and revitalize the present day educational system.

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