

R.N. Tagore's Philosophy of Education: An Overview

Gopal Das

Assistant Professor & Head

Department of Education

Indira Gandhi College, Boitamari

Bongaigaon (Assam)

Email: dasgopaledu1985@gmail.com

Abstract

Rabindra Nath Tagore, a trailblazing poet and educationist, left an indelible mark on India's educational terrain. His educational outlook, deeply intertwined with his life's philosophy, weaves together traditional Indian ethos with global viewpoints, influenced by luminaries like Rousseau, Froebel, and Dewey. Tagore championed an education system nurturing cultural roots, universal values, and ecological harmony. This paper explores Tagore's educational vision, dissecting its core tenets, essence, and goals, and scrutinizes how his life's journey, upbringing, and critiques of prevailing education systems shaped his innovative approach. The Shanti Niketan initiative showcased his holistic learning paradigm, emphasizing creativity, freedom, and inner growth. Tagore's philosophy yields valuable insights into crafting a more inclusive, empathetic, and enlightened society, offering guidance for a more humane and sustainable tomorrow.

Key words

Education, holistic, philosophy.

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Gopal Das

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Introduction:

Rabindra Nath Tagore is considered a towering figure in modern education, with his contributions leaving an indelible mark on India's educational landscape. With his pioneering thoughts and the Shanti Niketan experiments, Tagore revolutionized Indian education, infusing it with traditional culture while embracing global perspectives. He envisioned an education system rooted in Indian heritage, yet broad enough to resonate with Western ideals, fostering a synthesis that could bridge cultural divides. As Dr. H. B. Mukherjee says, "Tagore was the greatest prophet of educational renaissance in modern India,"¹ revealing his role as a trailblazer who expanded educational horizons. Tagore's emphasis on harmony with nature, cultural identity, and universal human values earned him the revered title of Gurudev, reflecting his profound impact on shaping modern education and inspiring generations.

It is important to note that Tagore's educational philosophy is deeply intertwined with his life philosophy and shaped by various influences. This means that Tagore's ideas about education are closely connected to his overall view of life, and both were influenced by various factors like his upbringing, experiences, and other thinkers. His educational philosophy reflects his broader values and perspectives on life. Apart from his family background, the ideas of prominent educationists like Rousseau, Froebel, John Dewey, and Pestalozzi significantly impacted his approach to education. Tagore's keen intellect allowed him to grasp concepts from natural and social sciences, further informing his educational outlook. Through personal experiences and observing the shortcomings of contemporary education systems, he gained insight into effective learning processes. S. C. Sarkar says, "He discovered for himself all the theories and principles of education which he was later to formulate for himself and use in his Shanti Niketan experiments."² This reveals that Tagore's was a self-driven journey to becoming a pioneering educationist who synthesized diverse influences into his unique philosophy.

Objectives: The main objectives of the paper are:

- (i) To explain the core principles underlying Tagore's philosophy of education
- (ii) To uncover the meaning of education as perceived by Tagore
- (iii) To examine the goals of education as outlined in Tagore's educational philosophy

Methodology: This study employs a qualitative methodology. It utilizes secondary sources to interpret Tagore's educational philosophy. Through a descriptive-analytical approach, it examines Tagore's writings, speeches, and the

Shanti Niketan experiments, complemented by existing research on his life and work. The paper critically assesses Tagore's core principles, the essence of education, and educational objectives, integrating insights to offer a thorough understanding of his educational thought.

Discussion and findings:

Tagore stands out among the world's most influential educationists due to his pioneering educational philosophy, which he successfully translated into practice. The fundamental principles underlying his philosophy of education are outlined below.

1. Education in the Lap of Nature: Education in the Lap of Nature is a key principle of Tagore's educational philosophy. Tagore's educational philosophy emphasizes learning amidst nature, where children are immersed in a natural setting, away from urban bustle. This approach fosters a child's connection with the environment, allowing them to thrive and find joy in the process of learning. By surrounding children with nature, Tagore believed that education becomes a more organic and enjoyable experience, nurturing their innate curiosity and creativity.

2. Freedom in Education: Freedom in education is a cornerstone of Tagore's educational philosophy, where he advocates for minimal restrictions and maximum autonomy for learners. Tagore says, "Where freedom and development lack, life does not exist there."³ Tagore believed that children should be given the liberty to explore and learn without rigid structures, allowing them to have a complete and pleasurable experience. This approach enables schools to provide an open environment, fostering diverse activities and nurturing individual growth, making freedom and joy integral to the learning process.

3. Education for Man's Fullness: Tagore's philosophy emphasizes education for holistic development, aiming to integrate diverse aspects of human nature. He believed education should transcend differences and reveal underlying unity, as reflected in his focus on developing the body, intelligence, soul, and self-expression. Dr. Mukherjee said, Tagore transformed integration into a principle of fullness, striving for "education for body, education for intelligence, education for soul and education for self-expression, by which he has made efforts for fullness of manhood."⁴ This approach nurtures complete human potential, fostering well-rounded individuals.

4. Mother Tongue the Medium of Teaching: Tagore emphasized the significance of mother tongue in education, believing it is the best medium for imparting knowledge and fostering self-expression. He felt that relying on a foreign language can hinder creativity and obstruct connection with deeper values. Tagore

wasn't opposed to learning English, but saw it as supplementary to one's native language, advocating for mother tongue as the primary medium of teaching. This approach, he believed, promotes authentic expression and cultural connection.

5. All round and Harmonious Development of Child: Education's goal is to nurture every facet of a child's nature, blending physical, emotional, and intellectual growth into a unified whole. This integrated approach helps children forge a unified identity, harmonizing varied talents and abilities, and shaping a personality that's nuanced and vibrant. Thus, by prioritizing comprehensive growth, education empowers individuals to reach their fullest potential, crafting empathetic, thoughtful, and multifaceted individuals ready to interact with their surroundings.

6. National Education: Tagore advocated for education that is deeply rooted in the national context, emphasizing the importance of connecting children with their cultural heritage and the trajectory of their nation's past, present, and future. Interestingly, this idea resonates with aspects of NEP 2020, highlighting the timeless relevance of Tagore's educational philosophy, which seeks to ground learning in a sense of place and identity, fostering informed and engaged citizens.

7. Education of Indian Culture: Tagore emphasized the significance of integrating Indian culture into education, claiming that a child's learning should be deeply rooted in and informed by a thorough understanding of the country's societal norms and cultural traditions, thereby fostering a strong sense of cultural identity and awareness.

8. Development of Artistic Faculties: R. N. Tagore was a strong proponent of cultivating creativity in children, highlighting education's role in developing artistic skills like music, acting, and visual arts to promote overall growth and self-expression.

9. Education for Community Life: Tagore believed education should be vibrant and relevant, rooted in community engagement. He advocated for children to participate in social service, fostering self-governance and a sense of responsibility.

10. Knowledge from Direct Sources: Tagore stressed the value of experiential learning, encouraging children to acquire knowledge firsthand from original sources instead of depending entirely on written materials.

11. Development of Creative Tendency: Education should provide opportunities for children to nurture their innate creativity, allowing their imaginative and innovative abilities to flourish.

12. Education of Social Ideals: Tagore advocated education that introduces children to community norms, cultural legacy, and current challenges, equipping them to navigate their environment.

13. Education by Independent Effort: Tagore's educational philosophy emphasizes self-directed learning, where children are empowered to pursue knowledge through personal initiative and autonomy.

14. End to Learning by Rote: Tagore promoted learning through direct experience, dismissing mechanical memorization. He stressed that education should mirror real-life contexts, quoting, "a child should not be compelled to memorize by rote. As far as possible the basis of a teaching method should be the real circumstances of life, nature and society."⁵

15. Education of Internationalism: Tagore's educational philosophy extends beyond individual growth, envisioning holistic development of humanity and societal progress. He emphasized instilling a sense of global citizenship and welfare, advocating education as a catalyst for comprehensive personal and collective advancement, aligning with principles echoed in NEP 2020.

Accordingly, it follows from the above fundamental principles of Tagore's philosophy of education that his philosophy encompasses everything necessary for the holistic development of a child through education. But the question arises: what does education mean according to Tagore? Or, in what sense did Tagore use the term education in his philosophy when he was at Shanti Niketan? At this juncture, it can be said that Tagore used the term 'education' in a very broad sense, as discussed below.

It wouldn't be an overstatement to say education is a lifelong journey aimed at holistic development. Tagore aptly captures its essence, saying, "The highest education is that which makes our life in harmony with all existence."⁶ This raises a question: what does Tagore mean by 'all existence'? Tagore's concept of 'all existence' encompasses the universe's entirety – living, non-living, moving, and stationary. Harmonizing with this vast expanse requires holistic growth, cultivating faculties to their peak. Tagore terms this state *manhood*, encompassing physical, intellectual, economic, moral, spiritual, and religious fulfillment.

Moreover, Tagore's educational philosophy draws from ancient Indian wisdom, particularly the concept of "*Sa vidya ya vimuktaye*"⁷ – education as a means to liberation. He broadens this idea, encompassing not just spiritual freedom from life's cycles, but also liberation from societal, economic, and psychological bondages. For Tagore, true education involves absorbing ancestral knowledge and grasping the essence of acquired wisdom. He emphasizes, "True education consists in knowing the use of any useful material that has been collected to know its real nature, and to build along with life a real shelter of life."⁸ Thus, there is no doubt that Tagore highlights a holistic approach to education that nurtures a deep connection with life.

The most pertinent question that needs to be taken care of is: what is the ultimate goal or aim of education according to Tagore's philosophy of education? His views on this are scattered across various articles, literary works, and lectures, from which the following aims of education can be inferred.

(i) Physical Development: Tagore prioritizes physical development as a key educational objective, highlighting the importance of nurturing a child's senses and bodily growth. He champions a natural, activity-driven approach, where children can freely interact with their environment. As Tagore said, "Climbing trees, delving into ponds, plucking and tearing flowers, preparing thousand and one mischiefs on Mother Nature, they would have obtained the nourishment of the body, the happiness of the mind and the satisfaction of the natural impulses of childhood."⁹ This reveals the value of experiential learning in promoting overall physical wellness.

(ii) Mental Development: Tagore emphasizes mental growth as a core educational objective, arguing that learning should be rooted in real-life experiences and surroundings. It is important to note here that Tagore dismisses rote learning or bookish education, instead advocating for hands-on engagement with nature and life. In his words, "There is education in the mere effort of knowing a living person directly instead of through books. It only gives some knowledge but develops the faculty of knowing to such an extent as is impossible in class-lectures – our intellect, emotions or imagination, if divorced from reality, become feeble and distorted,"¹⁰ focusing on his belief in experiential learning's power to shape young minds.

(iii) Moral and Spiritual Development: Apart from physical and mental development, Tagore emphasizes inner freedom and self-realization, prioritizing moral and spiritual growth. He advocates for education that instills patience, self-discipline, and inner knowledge. According to Dr. Mukherjee's quote, "This ideal of inner freedom may be expressed as the liberation of the self from all kinds of slavery. It aims at emancipation of the intellect from the domination of bookish knowledge."¹¹ Thus, it follows that Tagore focuses on liberating the mind and fostering spiritual values for comprehensive development.

(iv) Social Development and International Understanding: Tagore considers social development a key goal of education, emphasizing that it should instill a sense of social responsibility in learners. He views individual and societal progress as interconnected, stressing the role of social service in personal growth, on one hand, and rejecting narrow nationalism on the other. Thus, Tagore envisions a unified global community, advocating for education that fosters international understanding and a shared human identity.

(v) Development of Ability to Adjust: Tagore insists on preparing children to navigate life's complexities. He advocates for education that aligns with real-world demands. He says, "The first and foremost problem deserving attention at the present moment is the problem of creating harmony between our education and our life."¹² This reflects the need for learners to adapt and flourish in their environment.

Thus, it can be said that Tagore's educational outlook embraces a comprehensive approach, focusing on physical, mental, moral, spiritual, and social development. Through experiential learning, social responsibility, and global awareness, he seeks to cultivate adaptable, compassionate, and accomplished individuals. This cohesive framework supports personal growth and worldwide collaboration.

Conclusion:

In view of the above, it is clear that Rabindra Nath Tagore's educational philosophy has undeniable utility. His approach to learning emphasizes harmony with nature, cultural identity, and universal human values, aligning with NEP 2020. By integrating physical, mental, moral, spiritual, and social development, Tagore aims to nurture well-rounded individuals who can thrive and contribute to global cooperation, making them fit for the global market. His principles of experiential learning, social responsibility, and international understanding provide a comprehensive framework for personal growth and societal progress. In essence, Tagore's vision of education as a means to liberation and holistic development remains profoundly relevant, inspiring generations to strive for a more harmonious and enlightened world.

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