

Uma Das Gupta

*In Pursuit of a Different Freedom:
Tagore's world university at
Santiniketan*

The first question you may well ask is: what urged me to take up education. I had spent most of my time in literary pursuits till I was forty or more. I had never any desire to take my part in practical work, because I had a rooted conviction in my mind that I had not the gift...When I was thirteen I had finished going to school. I do not want to boast about it, I merely give it to you as a historical fact...I afterwards realised that what then weighed on my mind was the unnatural pressure of the system of education which prevailed everywhere...¹

Rabindranath Tagore, 1925.

From the commencement of our work we have encouraged our children to be of service to our neighbours from which has grown up a village reconstruction work in our neighbourhood, unique in the whole of India. Round our educational work the villages have grouped themselves in which the sympathy for nature and service for man have become one. In such extension of sympathy and service our mind realises its true freedom...

Along with this has grown an aspiration for even a higher freedom, a freedom from all racial and national prejudice...We are building up our institution upon the spiritual unity of all races. I hope it is going to be a meeting place for individuals from all countries who believe in the divine humanity, and who wish to make atonement for the cruel disloyalty displayed against her by men. Such idealists I have often met in my travels in the West, unknown persons of no special reputation who suffer and struggle for a cause most often ignored by the clever and the powerful...²

Rabindranath Tagore, 1931.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was primarily a poet, a writer of essays, plays, novels, and a dedicated educationist. For a short time, he was among the leaders of the *swadeshi* movement (1903-1907) which he had joined to protest against the British Government's decision to partition Bengal. But he withdrew from the movement, unable to take its sectarian and coercive ways. He turned instead to educational work, retreating to the countryside in 1901 where he established a school for children at a place called Santiniketan. He described it as 'an indigenous attempt in adapting modern methods of education in a truly Indian cultural environment'.³ Twenty years later he added a 'world university' to this school, and called it Visva-Bharati.⁴ Santiniketan in his own words was to grow into Visva-Bharati, 'a widely-branching tree'.⁵

Visva-Bharati was conceived to be a meeting place of the like-minded from all over the post-war world. Tagore felt that the war had brought a new age into being. "The task of my last years is to free the world from the coils of national chauvinism", he wrote.⁶ Visva-Bharati's motto, *Yatra visvam bhavati ekanidam*, meaning 'where the world finds its nest', was taken from an ancient Sanskrit verse. What was the poet's idea for a brotherhood of the 'world' and why was it so crucial to him? How and to what extent could he implement this idea at his Santiniketan institution?

In many ways the Santiniketan institution was a representation of Rabindranath's personal history. It was for him a response to the troubled questions of his changing times. He grew up when India was a British colony. Government schools imparted education in English. They taught subjects of which Indian children had no natural knowledge. Rabindranath later wrote of them as 'machine-made lessons'.⁷ Personally, he sought escape from them at the youthful age of thirteen.⁸

But even if he found freedom from the pressures of the prevailing school system when he was thirteen, thanks to his unusual family, his grown-up ideas and actions brought other pressures all through his life. He found his ideas to be no less alien among his countrymen than was the presence of the British.⁹ His concept of an Indian nation, freed from the conflict of communities, was not in line with the prevailing political movement. He wrote,

In Indian education we have to collect together treasures of Vedic, Puranic, Buddhist, Jaina and Islamic minds. We shall have to find out how the Indian mind has flown along these different chan-

nels. By some such means India will feel her identity in her diversity. We must understand ourselves in this extended and interlinked way or else the education we will receive will be like that of the beggar. No nation can be rich on begging.¹⁰

He left the political movement, and sought freedom by acting on his own ideas. But his actions drew a mere handful of his countrymen to his cause.

Rabindranath's ideas have received attention in recent scholarship on nationalism¹¹. His experiments with education at Santiniketan worked out his 'dual' approach to nationalism, by supporting its emphasis on self-respect but rejecting its unreasoned patriotism. Rabindranath's thought focused on the importance of the freedom of the mind and intellectual force, by which one could accept ideas from the whole world even in conditions of alien rule, and have commitment towards people who are distant as well as near. He launched his world university project when the nationalists were mobilising support for the Non-cooperation Movement under Mahatma Gandhi. When the news of the movement reached Tagore in Europe, he wistfully wrote, "What irony of fate is this that I should be preaching cooperation of cultures on this side of the sea just at the moment when the doctrine of non-cooperation is preached on the other side"?¹² He went ahead with establishing Visva-Bharati of which he wrote in 1921, "I have taken courage to invite Europe to our institution. There will be a meeting of truths here".¹³

Family, Culture, Religion and Contemporary Bengali Society

Looked at from the outside, our family appears to have accepted many foreign customs, but at its heart flames a national pride that has never flickered. The genuine regard my father had for his country he never forsook through all the vicissitudes of his life, and in his descendents it took shape as a strong patriotic feeling. Such, however, was by no means characteristic of the times of which I am writing. Our educated men were then keeping at arms' length both the language and thought of their native land. My elder brothers had nevertheless always cultivated Bengali literature.¹⁴

Rabindranath Tagore, 1890.

It is regrettable of course that we had lost the power of appreciating our own culture, and therefore did not know how to assign western culture its right place.¹⁵

Rabindranath Tagore, 1913.

Living in the palatial Jorasanko House built by Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, the Tagore family were a world unto themselves. The family had lived through varied fortunes and different phases of history. Grandfather Dwarkanath (1794-1846) was a very rich man, being a leading merchant of his times.¹⁶ A cosmopolitan by conviction, he went to England and gained the confidence of Queen Victoria. In contrast his son Debendranath (1817-1905) was a man of the high Hindu tradition of the Upanishads and austere.¹⁷ For this, his countrymen called him Maharshi, 'the great sage', just as his father was called the 'Prince' for his large-hearted charities and lavish ways. The flow continued as the third generation of Tagores grew up: Rabindranath and his siblings. Among them were Satyendranath, the first Indian to join the Indian Civil Service; philosopher Dwijendranath whom Gandhi revered and who was a staunch supporter of the Non-cooperation Movement; and Jyotirindranath who was an artist, a capable composer of songs and an innovator of *swadeshi* (home-made) enterprise. The brothers were also dedicated to the development of modernism in Bengali language and literature.¹⁸ In religion, the family was profoundly influenced by the monotheism of Rammohun Roy (1772-1883), and became the leaders of a Hindu reform movement which took Rammohun's work further towards establishing the Brahma Samaj.¹⁹

Among Rabindranath's important contributions to contemporary culture in 20th century Bengal, and India, was the restoration of the Upanishadic perception of the notion of one world—as a dominant ideology in the new system of knowledge. Rammohun Roy began the process, despite the conflicting tendencies of the times when he died in 1833. The 'renaissance' in 19th and 20th century Bengal, and some other parts of India, was a complex phenomenon. It was partly the outcome of the new ideas from the West arising out of the colonial connection, and partly a revival of traditional Indian thinking. There were many revivalists at the time who were determined to counter the changes brought about by the West's impact. In contrast, there were also those like the members of the Young Bengal Movement who were out to damn their past, and embrace only what the West had brought. Initially, Rabindranath was inclined to a Hindu view of the past. But he matured and moved on to build a strong secular and liberal-democratic interpretation of Indian history.

Patriotism, the Swadeshi Movement, and the Elite Nationalist Leadership

I remember the day during the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal when a crowd of young students came to see me, and said that if I would order them to leave their schools and colleges, they would instantly obey. I was emphatic in my refusal to do so, and they went away angry, doubting the sincerity of my love for my motherland.²⁰

Rabindranath Tagore, 1908

Our students are bringing their offering of sacrifices to what? Not to a fuller education but to a non-education.²¹

Rabindranath Tagore, 1921

Then when the Bangadarshan magazine came into my hands, Bengal was beside herself at the sound of the sharpening of the knife for her partition. The boycott of Manchester, which was the outcome of her distress, had raised the profits of the Bombay mill-owners to a super foreign degree. And I had then to say: "This will not do, either; for it is also of the outside. Your main motive is hatred of the foreigner, not love of country."²²

Rabindranath Tagore, 1921

Rabindranath learnt his political lessons well from the Swadeshi Movement, having actually participated in it during the years 1903-1907. In 1905 he outlined his original vision of a self-governing and self-reliant nation in an important essay called 'Swadeshi Samaj', meaning National Society.²³ It was addressed to all those young people's associations from the urban middle class which supplied the Swadeshi Movement with its most ardent activists. There he hoped for a revival of traditional society or samaj for the good of all concerned, irrespective of caste or creed. The bond of unity was sought through the Hindu religion and *samaj* as Rabindranath believed that Hinduism had helped to unite the diverse elements in India's history. But this hope was shattered with the rise of political extremism, group manoeuvring, and the outbreak of communal rioting. He withdrew from the movement in protest. He realised that the politics of the day was not for him. During the emergence of the Non-cooperation Movement he felt the same inner resistance. He respected Gandhi's real worth for the country, but found his strategy of non-cooperation unacceptable. So he wrote,

What I heard on every side was that reason and culture, as well, must be censured. It was only necessary to cling to an

unquestioning obedience. Obedience to whom? To some mantra, some unreasoned creed!²⁴

Whatever their disagreement Gandhi understood Rabindranath's concern and called him a 'sentinel', a soldier for a larger cause.²⁵

Despite withdrawing from the movement, Rabindranath's responses to politics was close to Gandhi's thoughts and actions. Rabindranath held that Gandhi was the one leader in Indian politics who was committed wholly to truth and love. In his essay 'The Call of Truth' he wrote,

The movement, which has now succeeded the swadeshi agitation, is ever so much greater and has moreover extended its influence all over India. Previously, the vision of our political classes had never reached beyond the English knowing classes, because the country meant for them only that bookish aspect of it which is to be found in the pages of the Englishman's history. Such a country was merely a mirage born of vapourings in the English language, in which flitted about thin shades of Burke and Gladstone, Mazzini and Garibaldi. Nothing resembling self-sacrifice or true feeling for their countrymen was visible. At this juncture Mahatma Gandhi came and stood at the cottage door of the destitute millions, clad himself as one of them, talked to them in their own language. Here was the truth at last, not a mere quotation out of a book ... Who else has felt so many men of India to be his own flesh and blood?²⁶

Rabindranath's withdrawal from the political movements made him unpopular with the nationalist leadership; but not with Gandhi and Nehru, who found his ideas for a liberal and secular democracy crucial in shaping India's future, particularly in the inter-War years. Rabindranath continued to protest single-handedly against the Raj on a number of occasions. He was unequivocal about the brutal nature of alien rule in his letter of 20 May 1919 to the Viceroy, when renouncing his knighthood over the Amritsar massacre.²⁷ But even there he explained his action by writing, "There is such a thing as a moral standard of judgement. When India suffers injustice, it is right that we should stand against it; and the responsibility is ours to right the wrong, not as Indians but as human beings".²⁸ In a message to his own countrymen over Amritsar he declared, "Let us forget the Punjab affairs—but never forget that we shall go on deserving such humiliation over and over again until we set our house in order. Do not mind the waves of the sea, but mind the leaks in your own vessel".²⁹ That was Rabindranath's theory of education for you: that of training

the people in self-examination and self-reliance as an essential need in the struggle for Indian independence to which he remained firmly rooted.

City and Village: Science, Education and Rural Life

*A deep despair now pervades rural life all over the country, so much so that the high sounding phrases like home rule, autonomy, etc., appear to me almost ridiculous and I feel ashamed even to utter them.*³⁰

Rabindranath Tagore, 1908.

*Outside the bhadralok class pathetic in its struggle to affix university labels to the names of its members, there is a vast obscure multitude who cannot even dream of such a costly ambition. With them we have our best opportunity if we know how to use it there, and there only can we be free to offer to our country the best kind of all-round culture not mutilated by the official dictators. I have generally noticed that when the charitably minded city-bred politicians talk of education for the village folk they mean a little left-over in the bottom of their cup after diluting it copiously...Our people need more than anything else a real scientific training that could instill in them the courage to experiment and initiative of mind that we lack as a nation.*³¹

Rabindranath Tagore, 1937.

Tagore grew up in the city till he was sent to manage his family estates in rural Bengal when he was twenty-nine years old. He did this from 1890 to 1920. There he saw for the first time the great natural beauty in the East Bengal landscape, lined by mighty rivers and wrote ecstatically about it. But he also learnt with great sadness what poverty meant seeing the lives of the villagers. "I, the town-bred, had been received into the lap of rural loveliness and I began joyfully to satisfy my curiosity. Gradually the sorrow and poverty of the villages became clear to me, and I began to grow restless to do something about it."³²

The idea of doing something constructive for his country's poor arose from that experience. The situation in 19th and 20th century Indian society was such that while the peasant still adhered to his traditions with no exposure to anything else, the English-educated Indian intelligentsia felt superior to their village brethren out of their newly-found university education. Both Gandhi and Rabindranath were convinced that if India were to become free and independent, and recover self-respect, work must begin to overcome the weaknesses of poverty and division from within society.

While Gandhi chose the political path, Rabindranath chose education. To him, it was a catastrophe that the educated elite regarded a large part of their own countrymen as *chhotolok*, literally small people. Rabindranath developed his most trenchant critique of English education on the following grounds: first, that it was there to create only an army of job-seekers to feed the colonial administration and their businesses; second, that it divided fathers and sons socially and emotionally; third, that such an education was a waste for society as there was no understanding nor love between the teacher and the taught; fourth, that it was totally dissociated from Indian life.³³

He felt that the only way to overcome such a demeaning state was by uniting each one of us, and feeling compassion for one another through a new education for all. In modern times, the town had become the repository of knowledge, wealth and power. It was necessary that the village should benefit from this by cooperation with the town. A new education would have to bridge the gap between the city and the village, and would introduce a variety of knowledge from the cultures of other lands.

As a first step in that direction he chose to establish his school in the heart of rural Bengal, not far from the big city of Calcutta. Such a location gave him the ability to draw upon both raw materials and cultural products indigenously. Teaching was given in the mother tongue. Those who joined the school as pupils were from urban backgrounds. The school was made strictly residential with students and teachers and families of teachers all living closely, in an educational colony that became a community. Rabindranath insisted on the urban children's need to live and learn in a different atmosphere away from their city homes; and that their education would be incomplete without knowledge of rural living. For him and Gandhi there was no forgetting that the majority of Indians lived in the villages and lived in poverty.

*Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati as Training Ground for Freedom of Mind:
Success or Failure?*

*I have said repeatedly and must repeat once more that we cannot afford to lose our mind for the sake of any external gain ...we must refuse to accept as our ally the illusion-haunted magic-ridden slave mentality that is at the root of all poverty and insult under which our country groans.*³⁴

Rabindranath Tagore, 1921.

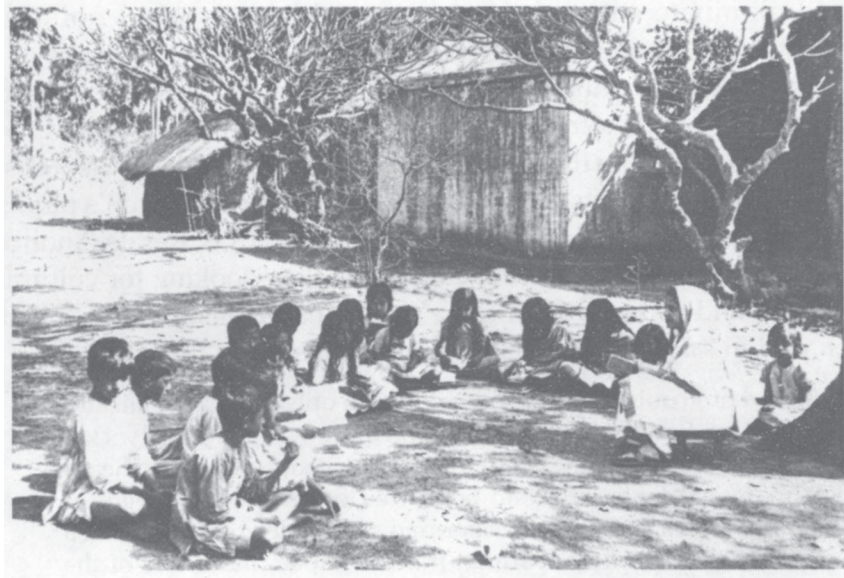
For Rabindranath, the Santiniketan institution became a lifelong engagement to establish an environment of reasoned thinking and living by breaking down the forces of bigotry and separatism. For this, he advocated neither the boycott of government, nor cooperation with government. He did not seek the government's favour for education, sanitation, peace, order and justice. He was embarrassed to find that even the movement for an Indian 'renaissance' sought the British government's intervention to remedy the imperfections of Indian society. Thus freeing himself of the 'renaissance' he turned to work away from the limelight of all movements. His goal was unity among people. The Santiniketan education was an experiment to bring about cultural understanding and unity at two levels: first, between the urban and the rural through education in the mother-tongue, and learning about each other's skills; second, between India and the West through exchange of knowledge, and a recognition of each other's contribution to civil society. Visva-Bharati was the home to both a Centre for Advanced Study in Cultures and a Centre for Rural Reconstruction, within a radius of two miles. Rabindranath's hope was to make the Santiniketan-Sriniketan experiment show the rest of the country that a broader education and wider exposure to the life of man and his wide-ranging creativity would eliminate cultural domination, ultimately even political domination, of any one group over the other.

Given those beginnings, Santiniketan was clearly able to establish a way of life which attracted men and women from other parts of India, and indeed from the world. Some twenty years ago, in the 1980s, I travelled in many parts of India searching for the institution's pupils from the twenties and thirties. They came from Madras, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat to Santiniketan. Most were looking for cultural education, and some of them came from a nationalist milieu. "I had taken part in *satyagraha*", V.Balgangadhar Menon (b.1916) told me.

After that I could continue my education only in a nationalist institution. Santiniketan and Sabarmati were the only two institutions which came to our mind in this connection. I had heard of many students who had boycotted government colleges at Gandhiji's call and gone to Sabarmati and made good. I too had a recommendation for Sabarmati from Kellapan, the father of the nationalist movement in Kerala. But I hankered for a more cultural and philosophical education. So I wrote off myself for admission to Santiniketan supported by my eldest brother.³⁵



Sriniketan



Santiniketan
Tagore Museum and Archives,
Viva Bharati University Santiniketan

V. Gopala Reddy was also from a nationalist background. He spent the years 1924-27 at the Santiniketan College. In 1982 he told me,

I was thirteen and half when I boycotted government school at Gandhiji's call for non-cooperation. My brother and I were immediately sent off to the Andhra Jatiya Kalachalam at Masulipatam, where I stayed for four years. By then I had read Tagore and felt greatly attracted towards him. I was determined to leave Masulipatam for Santiniketan. My nationalist commitment was not at all hampered there. On the contrary there were other things there that interested me. There was music, art; I loved that in Santiniketan. There I began to learn other Indian languages in Santiniketan, Tamil from my Tamil friends, Gujarati from my Gujarati friends.³⁶

Mrinalini Sarabhai (b.1923) came to Santiniketan in 1939-1940. When speaking about her experience she said, "It was as though I had been touched by Santiniketan. I was lucky. So many of us live through life without being touched".³⁷ Indira Gandhi spent a year studying in the Santiniketan College in 1933. She said,

Santiniketan revived in me certain traditions which I used to know in my childhood. These traditions, which were an essential part of my grandfather's household at the time of my childhood became a little inconsequential after his death. But they were revived in me in Santiniketan—traditions like observing Vasant Sri Panchami. I have observed them in my own life ever since.³⁸

One can add to these examples from the testimony of people who were touched by the Santiniketan way of life. What was clear from their experience is that they had individually and together learned to appreciate and identify an Indian culture. Some also came from the West, either invited by the poet himself as were the Indologists Sylvain Levi from the Sorbonne or Guiseppe Tucci from Rome, also the young English graduate in agriculture from Cornell who was asked to start Visva-Bharati's centre for rural reconstruction. Some came of their own explorations such as Alex Arenson who had escaped Nazi Germany and come to study in England. He came to Santiniketan in 1937 and stayed there till 1944 teaching English. There were other westerners like W.W.Pearson and C.F. Andrews who chose to dedicate themselves to the ideals of the Santiniketan institution in preference to their missionary work. When Andrews died in 1940, Gandhi wrote about Andrews to Rabindranath, "Santiniketan was his as much as it

is yours".³⁹ It is through them all that Rabindranath felt that 'the true India is an idea and not a mere geographical fact'.⁴⁰

Indians and foreigners came together, with the fusion of studies combining courses on Indian traditions, Western culture, China, Japan and the Middle East. The poet once wrote happily to Andrews in 1920: "Now I know more clearly than ever before that Santiniketan belongs to all the world and we shall have to be worthy of that fact."⁴¹ But he did not take long to add that "[he] did not have the courage to go all the way...to come completely out of the net in which the system of education has enmeshed our country".⁴² That he could not do all he wanted to with his experiments at Santiniketan and Sriniketan was becoming evident in his own lifetime. Voicing disappointment over Santiniketan he called it 'a borrowed cage' as the students were demanding a more prosaic curriculum to help them get degrees and jobs.⁴³

What must have also hurt is that Santiniketan and Sriniketan remained apart. While the Santiniketan institution contributed to the cultural enrichment of the elite, its surrounding villages hardly changed. The founder's idea of integrating the city and the village was clearly not realised even within that small radius of space. Did Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati then prove what Tagore's nationalist critics were saying about his idea? They said from the start that the poet was 'dissociated from reality', that his world university was merely an 'abstract' idea, even "opposed to human history".⁴⁴

Rabindranath did not agree. To him the value of education at Santiniketan was that those who came were given freedom to know themselves.⁴⁵ He wrote "What I wanted to do was to free the student's minds through education ... that is why I could not bring our school under the discipline of any university". Therefore, calling Santiniketan a successful or a failed institution does not help. Its relevance was as a greatly encompassing idea, an unprecedented one in the range it offered. Rabindranath put his faith in a united world in more ways than one. His school and university were witness to that effort against every odd.

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