

## Chapter 2

# The Emerging Picture: A Social-Historical Perspective and Significant Personalities

**Abstract** This chapter gives us insight into how Rabindranath became one of the few world figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The historical understanding of the Tagore family and the movements it was associated with over 100 years is very crucial in the emergence of the Tagore phenomenon. The process of colonization of a huge country and the subsequent change in power and administration from a merchant company to the British crown ushered in change on an unprecedented scale in every sphere of life. It was as if tradition was forced to confront modernity and this was felt very deeply in the sphere of education. The history of the Indian renaissance closely enmeshed in the various measures of the spread of education was experienced more sharply in Bengal, the then capital of the British Raj. Many luminaries were active in bringing about the fruits of modern education to the people of who the Tagores were front runners. Tagore's personal experiences of modern education convinced him of the need to think anew about what should be the nature of education. His own path to education had been through his intense relationship with nature, creativity and joy; of his exposure to various cultures and societies and the freedom, he enjoyed in expressing his ideas and experiences through his writings. Tagore spent some years in rural Bengal from which he gained insight into the condition of the peasantry and the life of the poor villagers and this opened for him another dimension in his educational endeavours.

**Keywords** History and the Tagores • Colonial forces and education • Indian renaissance • Rural life and education

We enjoyed the freedom of the outcaste. We had to build our own world with our own thoughts and energy of mind... I was born in a family which had to live its own life, which led me from my young days to seek guidance for my own self-expression in my own inner standard of judgement.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore (henceforth RNT), cited in Anthony Xoares (ed.) *Rabindranath Tagore: Lectures and Addresses*, 1988, pp. 4–5.

## 2.1 Bengal Navajagaran: The Renaissance and the Tagores

All of us are products of our times—most of us are carried on time’s shoulders while a few carry time on theirs. Tagore would be counted among those few. Very seldom in human history has come a moment when we find successive generations of one family line straddling the pre- and post-epochs of change—undoubtedly, the Tagores were one of those illustrious examples. Tagore was born on 7 May 1861 in the Tagore ancestral home situated in Jorasanko in Kolkata. This ancestral home became a fountainhead of culture—expressed through enterprise, innovation, talent, interests and who ‘employed their influence and wealth for the good of society and cultural enrichment’.<sup>2</sup> Tagore was born to Devendranath Tagore and his wife Sarada Devi; he was the fourteenth child of the fifteen children born to this couple; the last son died soon after birth and thus Tagore from a young age was the youngest in the family. The Tagores maintained a joint-family system; Jorasanko Thakur Bari was a bustling household of countless kin and servants, accounts of which regale us in his autobiographies.<sup>3</sup>

In the fifteenth century, the Tagores were ostracized as Pirali Brahmins (Brahmins who had lost their caste because of association with the Muslims) and who on shifting their base from the then East Bengal to Calcutta flourished through their business links with the East India Company. It was as if ostracism gave the family the necessary impetus to carve out their own path. Rabindranath has remarked, ‘Long before my birth our family had cast off the anchor of society and had reached a distant mooring’.<sup>4</sup>

The Tagores were educated; they were patrons of culture and because of their enterprising efforts, became wealthy and prominent and were counted among the first families of the newly emerging metropolitan city of Calcutta that was the capital of British India till late nineteenth century. It was the time of the British Orientalist Policy (1772–1830),<sup>5</sup> and the Asiatic Society was established in 1784 of which Tagore’s grandfather, Dwarakanath Tagore, became the first Indian member and patron. Important works under the aegis of the Asiatic Society in archaeology, indology, philology, history and ethnography by British Orientalists marked a shift from Persian to English influence in language, administration, education and social ways. During the early days of the East India Company, Persian was the official language of administration under Mughal influence.<sup>6</sup> The training college for civil servants was established in 1800. These and many more institutions could be regarded as ushers of the Bengal Renaissance or *Navajagaran*. The missionaries under the leadership of William Carey introduced in 1800 the printing press

<sup>2</sup> William Radice, *Selected Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*, 1985, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> RNT, *My Reminiscences*, tr. Surendranath Tagore, 2008b, and RNT, *Boyhood Days*, tr. Radha Chakravarty, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> RNT, ‘Atmaparichay’, *Bichitra*, 1961, p. 310.

<sup>5</sup> See Kathleen M. O’Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet as Educator*, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

and brought out ancient Bengali and Sanskrit texts; this in some ways obviated the dominant power of English language; the Bible was translated into Bengali. This revival of the vernacular over the increasing popularity of English gave an impetus for a rethinking of the Hindu traditions and in the process rekindled the name and work of the illustrious Rammohun Roy (1774–1833) as one of the pioneers in the fields of religious and social reforms in the late eighteenth century. His vast education in most of the world religions, his ability in many languages, his clear and analytic mind made him one of the most powerful religious and social reformers.<sup>7</sup> He had found support from the Tagore family especially from Dwarkanath Tagore, and both Devendranath (Tagore’s father) and Rabindranath Tagore admitted their lifelong indebtedness to the influence of Rammohun Roy. The Tagores carried the legacy of Rammohun forward. Tagore wrote, ‘Raja Rammohun Roy inaugurated the modern age in India.... In social usage, in politics, in the realm of religion, and art, we had entered the zone of uncreative habit, of decadent tradition, and ceased to exercise our humanity. In this dark gloom of India’s degeneration Rammohun rose up, a luminous star in the firmament of India’s history, with prophetic purity of vision, and unconquerable heroism of soul. He shed radiance all over the land; he rescued us from the penury of self-oblivion. ...He is the great path maker of this century...’<sup>8</sup>

It was into that era of great change when the changes were being coalesced that Tagore was born into a family that was among the front runners. C.F. Andrews wrote, ‘In Bengal it was the shock of the Western civilization that startled the East into new life and helped forward the wonderful rebirth. Then, there followed the revival of the Sanskrit Classics and a reformation from within of the old religions. These two forces, acting together, made the Bengal Renaissance a living power in Asia. In Bengal itself the literary and artistic movement came into greater prominence. Rabindranath Tagore has been its crown’.<sup>9</sup> The accounts of the atmosphere in the Tagore household provided us the variegated flavours, tastes and smells that had touched Tagore imbuing him with genius. ‘The great advantage that I enjoyed in my younger days was the literary and artistic atmosphere that pervaded our house.... Pandits of the deepest learning would visit father’s drawing room to discuss the scriptures and the sciences; musicians would display their skill. Such people made of our house a living university’.<sup>10</sup>

Tagore’s eldest brother Dwijendranath was a philosopher, mathematician and poet. He spent most of his life in his literary and academic work; his second

<sup>7</sup> See Saumendranath Tagore, *Raja Ram Mohan Roy*, 1966 for biographical details.

<sup>8</sup> RNT, ‘Rammohun’ (1933), in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 3 (henceforth EWRT3), pp. 667–669.

<sup>9</sup> Reverend Charles Freer Andrews was a lifelong compatriot of both Tagore and Gandhi who gave his services to Visva-Bharati and to Gandhi’s freedom struggle. He brought Tagore and Gandhi together having known Gandhi during his days in South Africa. The extract is from his ‘Letters from Abroad’, collected as *Letters to a Friend* (1928), EWRT3, op. cit. pp. 219–221.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, 2nd Edition, 1948, p. 20.

brother, Satyendranath became the first Indian civil service officer and was a Sanskrit scholar. His wife, Jnadanandini,<sup>11</sup> was a progressive woman, who broke many social rules and conventions governing women's behaviour; travelled with her husband to England, she could play the piano and ride horses. The modern way of draping a sari with the accompaniments of blouse and petticoat was attributed to her. Hemendranath, the third brother of Tagore, was incharge of the education of the young in the Tagore household—Tagore was principally educated by home tutors and his brothers. It went to the credit of Hemendranath that he ensured that Rabindranath and the other youngsters under his care were taught in their mother tongue, Bengali, in some defiance of the prevalent customs and practices. English as a subject was also taught to the children. 'Hemendranath had the farsight and courage to give primacy to the cultivation of the mother tongue in his scheme of children's education against all opposition and current fashion'.<sup>12</sup>

Jyotirindranath, Tagore's fifth brother, was a good musician and had many hobbies and interests and a very good literary taste—it was with the encouragement and appreciation of this brother and his wife, Kadambari, that Tagore explored his poetic and musical talent from a very early age. Kadambari had a deep interest in and appreciation of Bengali literature. It may be mentioned that the women who entered the Tagore household as brides came at a very young age as was the custom then; Jnadanandini, Kadambari and even Tagore's wife, Mrinalini, came as prepubescent girls who were transformed into talented and cultured women. Clearly the 'situation made the man'! 'When I had a few birthdays behind me, Jyotirindranath took me in hand. Though he was a good 12 years older than me, he never looked down on me as a child. He was always at the piano absorbed in composing tunes ever new. The task of quickly fitting words to these improvisations was left to me. Without his encouragement, who knows whether I should ever have blossomed into a songwriter? The stream of song that he set free in me will remain my life's companion to my last hour'.<sup>13</sup>

Rabindranath's third sister, Swarnakumari, was a pioneer Bengali novelist and musician. Rabindranath's cousin, Ganendranath, was also very talented; he was a dramatist and musician and kept the whole household alive and stimulated with his dramatic productions. Ganendranath's father was an amateur scientist devoted to experiments in Chemistry. The two sons of Ganendranath's brother and Gunendranath were responsible for the movement in fine art that is called the Bengal School—they were Gaganendranath and Abanindranath. The legacy of staging plays, meanwhile, continued with most members of the household participating in them including the women and this was also a first in the society of those times. Rabindranath took this legacy to greater heights when he established his institutions and travelled to many places with his plays and dance-dramas in order to spread the message of his institutions in which girls and women played pivotal roles.

<sup>11</sup> The pronunciation of Jnadanandini is Gyanadanandini; Jnan or Gyan means knowledge.

<sup>12</sup> H. B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, 2013, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> RNT, *My Reminiscences*, op. cit. p. 34.

## 2.2 Colonial Educational Scene

What were the prevalent systems of education when Rabindranath was a child? In 1835, the Macaulay's minutes on education were adopted by which the 'social, cultural and political upliftment of India was to be made possible along Western lines. This policy was supported by both Rammohun Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore, who used their influence towards the allotment of government funds for schools providing English education'.<sup>14</sup> Macaulay's words are of some interest; '...it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population'.<sup>15</sup> However, this plan succeeded only in pushing the case of English or Western education while the other greater plan for development of the vernaculars as noted in the minutes did not take off. Between 1844 and 1846, under the leadership of Devendranath, a vernacular journal (*Tattvabodhini Patrika*) and a vernacular school for teaching theology and science were started; a few textbooks were composed; however, due to financial difficulties, the school was closed. There were quite a number of journals and magazines in Bengali that started to be published in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Among other agents of change, the printing press was a prime liberator and catalyst of change. It was as if the expression and experience of the many were provided a means of communication; the publications became mediums of conveying information, generating information and debate—a template in which the only parameter was the urge to communicate and thereby participate in issues larger than the individual. The English dailies were perceived as the voice of the colonizer while the vernacular press enjoyed the confidence and trust of the people. Also, what was important was the fact that from a largely oral culture there was a transformation to a written one—certainly an impetus to learn the letters, if nothing else more of education. Education on a larger scale was the demand of the times for which neither the traditional systems nor the colonial provisions were enough.

The continuity of Western education and English as the medium of instruction was reaffirmed in 1854, and it was under this dispensation that the universities in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay were set up (they were not really teaching universities, they became so much later<sup>16</sup>); it was decided to increase vernacular schools

---

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit. p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Source <http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/Macaulay001.htm> for the text of the minutes on education drawn up by T.B. Macaulay, 1835.

<sup>16</sup> See Report of the Sadler Commission, 1832, [http://www.kkhsou.in/main/education/calcutta\\_university.html](http://www.kkhsou.in/main/education/calcutta_university.html).

for elementary education and promote girls' education.<sup>17</sup> In 1857, the governance of India passed to the British Crown and the trend of English education was on the rise. Resistance to British rule was growing and there was a rising nationalistic feeling. This was felt strongly in the area of education. However, when Tagore was old enough to go to school, that he would be sent to a modern school where he would learn English among other subjects, was foregone.

There are very few and uncertain records of the state of the indigenous education that existed in the early days of colonization in India. In a survey of the indigenous schools in Bihar and Bengal in the years 1835, 1836 and 1838, William Adam reported the presence of a meagre number, but more importantly, he gave a definition of indigenous schools. He identified indigenous schools as only those institutions organized and established by the indigenous people and not supported by religious or charitable bodies. He obviously did not include the Islamic 'schools' such as the *maktab* and the *madrasah* or schools established by Christian missionaries. He further noted the kind of curriculum followed in the indigenous schools, a modicum of the three R's, as that of the primary level. The report mentioned that there were no caste distinctions in such schools, they being open to anyone who came.<sup>18</sup> However, there was no connection between this and higher education that seemed restricted to the higher castes and the well off.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the reforms initiated and given shape by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) were significant and important. He could be described as a true successor to Rammohun in forging his own path to what he believed would achieve education for the masses. He worked within the vernacular structure, writing new texts on grammar, prose, and translations<sup>19</sup> that would be understood by many who had had no grounding in Sanskrit. Sanskrit was never a language of communication; rather, it was the language of intellectual discourse in literature, philosophy, religion, etc. Vidyasagar set up vernacular schools and a teacher training centre. Vidyasagar and his colleagues prepared the texts for the various subjects that formed the course—English, Greek and Indian literature, history and culture, arithmetic, astronomy, philosophy and biology. This was certainly modern education. Vidyasagar championed the cause of girls' education and between 1857 and 1858 there were as many as 40 schools for girls. However, the government did not continue with the grant given to Vidyasagar therefore he could not continue to run the schools. In another part of the country, we find Dayanand

<sup>17</sup> For more details see Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit. pp. 51–54.

<sup>18</sup> Paramesh Acharya, *Banglar deshaj sikhshadhara*, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Bani Basu (Compiler), *Bangla Sisu Sahitya: Granthapanji* (1818–1962), 1965, pp. 23–25. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar wrote two important primers *Varnaparichay I* and *Varnaparichay II* in 1854 and 1855. We see Bengali textbooks making their appearance since 1817; the content of which was largely moral and language was without embellishment. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, we see more attractive story books inspired to some extent by Vidyasagar. Tagore's sister Swarnakumari Devi brought quite a sea change in the quality and style in children's literature of that time. Of course, the golden period of children's literature in Bengal was the one ushered by Tagore himself. He wrote textbooks and books that would constitute the surplus (see [Chap. 3](#) for development of this concept) in reading.

Saraswati (1824–1883) and his follower, Swami Shraddhanand, working on institutionalizing traditional teachings of the Vedas on a model wherein the best of the Orient and the Occident is synthesised on the basis of which he established the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College and an Aryan Girls' School both in 1896 in Lahore. Shraddhanand also set up a Gurukul in the Himalayan mountains in 1902.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1890s, Annie Besant, an English social reformer and a supporter of Theosophy, a religious movement founded by Helena Blavatsky in 1875, came to India and founded the Theosophical Society of India under the aegis of which schools were established. She laid importance on the learning of Sanskrit and the ancient texts, and it was thus the links with Dayanand were formed in the early days; however, Annie Besant made her own path in the field of education with emphasis on girls' education. Her educational goal was, 'To make man a good Citizen of a free and spiritual Commonwealth of Humanity'.<sup>21</sup> Besant came to live in India permanently where she remained interested in the subject of women's education and rights.

The other prominent educational endeavour was the mass education movement launched by Vivekananda (1863–1902), a firebrand social reformer, through the Rama Krishna Mission. The Rama Krishna Mission was established by Swami Vivekananda in the name of his religious teacher, Paramhansa Ramakrishna, a maverick Sadhu. The Mission directed its activities towards mass education. Swami Vivekananda had said, 'We have had a negative education all along from our boyhood. We have only learnt that we are nobodies. Seldom are we given to understand that great men were ever born in our country. ... We master all the facts and figures concerning the ancestors of the English, but we are sadly unmindful of our own. ... Being a conquered race, we have brought ourselves to believe that we are weak and have no independence in anything. ... the faith in our own selves must be reawakened, and then only, all the problems which face our country will gradually be solved by ourselves'.<sup>22</sup> Margaret Noble, an Irish educator, who was one of Vivekananda's closest disciples, lived in India assuming the name of Sister Nivedita. She worked on the educational ideas of Vivekananda as well as participating in the national movement for the promotion of education of which Tagore was also a member. She was familiar with the work of Froebel and Pestalozzi, and it can be supposed that she shared their ideas in her many interactions with Tagore to whom she was close. She had a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, and Tagore may have met some of them through her and she too would have met some of Tagore's friends. It may be interesting to note that it was Sister Nivedita who had urged the scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose, a close friend of Tagore, to persevere in his research and publish his findings.

The National Education Movement for higher education was formed towards the end of the century; this was born out of the public criticism of English educational system. Initially, the focus was to point out the deficiencies and

<sup>20</sup> Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit. pp. 81–82.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Volume 5, 1964, p. 332; for more details see Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit. p. 116.

disadvantages of an English education broadening it out as a forum for the ideas of nationalist education and nationalist activities. The Bengal National College was established in 1905 by which time Rabindranath had already started his school known as Brahmacharyashram, in Santiniketan discussed in the next chapter.

Many other groups were protesting not only against foreign dominion but also the attempts to restrict the reach of education. The Muslims were not behind-hand in their efforts to spread education—English-medium elementary schools were established in Delhi (1857) where modern education rather than training in Islamic scripture was provided. The history of Islamic schools for modern education established the fact that every creed was becoming aware of the importance of education in the lives of the people. Thus, there was a continuity in the movement for education that owed its origin to the reforms of Rammohun Roy and his times.

### 2.3 Tagore's Personal Experiences of Education

Tagore expressed the desire to go to school in imitation of his cousins and other youngsters in his family; his illusions of the joys of school were shattered in a very little time. His family tried a number of schools, but when he was about 13 or 14, he set against all kind of formal schooling. The Tagore household took educating the young very seriously, so there was always a system of home tutoring in the house. 'School grabbed the best part of the day, and only fragments of time in the morning and evening slipped through its clutching fingers. As soon as I entered the class-room, the benches and tables forced themselves rudely on my attention, elbowing and jostling their way into my mind. ...There is a kind of grasshopper which takes the colour of the withered leaves among which it lurks unobserved. In like manner my spirit also shrank and faded among those faded, drab coloured days'.<sup>23</sup> When Tagore finally stopped going to school, his education at home was taken up in earnest. He had also received by this time a good grounding in the Sanskrit texts to which his father was deeply attached and believed in.

Rabindranath described in detail his trip to the Himalayas passing through the plains of Santiniketan (then referred as Bolpur) with his father who took special care of shaping young Rabindranath's thoughts.<sup>24</sup> This was like a spiritual experience for Tagore as well as a lesson in independence and responsibility. This was also an exposure to the influences of Nature—amid the lofty peaks of the Himalayas and among the forests, greeting the rising sun and saluting the setting one with the words of the Upanishads left a deep impression on Tagore's precocious and sensitive mind. That the world came to regard him as a sage seems to date back to the time he spent in the company of his saintly father who was known as the Maharshi or the great sage. Rabindranath grew up as a man of immense

<sup>23</sup> RNT, *My Boyhood Days*, tr. Marjorie Sykes, 2nd Edition, 2011, pp. 36–37.

<sup>24</sup> RNT, *Jivansmriti*, Centenary Edition, Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee (ed.) 4th Edition, 2011, pp. 43–56.



calmness that radiated in his demeanour helping him weather the many bereavements in his lifetime—he lost his wife, father, two of his children in quick succession (between 1902 and 1907) by the time he was only 46 years of age.<sup>25</sup>

Tagore's childhood experience of the home schooling he received and anecdotes from his reminiscences inform us of the lessons he had to undergo and his reaction to them. The day's routine was well packed with lessons. The child was woken up while it was still dark and made to practise wrestling after which a medical student would come to teach him physiology complete with Latin names of the bones of a human skeleton. With the mathematics tutor, Rabindranath practised almost all the branches; followed by lessons in natural science with simple experiments and then lessons in Sanskrit and Bengali that were taught by various tutors. He ate his first major meal at about 9.30 in the morning, and at 10, he was sent to school. His schedule after coming back from school was equally packed; at 4.30 in the afternoon, he had his lessons with the gymnastic teacher, drawing master and last of all when he was almost dropping with sleep, the English teacher. The house musicians supplemented Rabindranath's musical education. Here too, forced lessons did not work but what he picked up he did so by choice. He was gifted with a good musical sense and voice as well as an appreciation of all genres of music. 'Books tell us that the discovery of fire was one of the biggest discoveries of man. I do not wish to dispute this—but I cannot help feeling how fortunate the little birds are that their parents cannot light lamps in the evening. They have their language lessons early in the morning and how gleefully they learn them! But then they do not have to learn the English language'.<sup>26</sup> Tagore remarked, 'My learning at any rate was a profitless cargo. If one seeks to key an instrument at too high a pitch, the strings will snap beneath the strain'.<sup>27</sup>

What were the activities and interests of young Rabi's childhood? He was not the usual truant or that all his lessons were 'tipped out of the boat and sent to the bottom'.<sup>28</sup> He was intensely curious and attracted to nature, to the beauty of a breaking dawn, the shimmering leaves with the dewdrops at their ends, the lure of the unknown and faraway. He described all this through the character of a little boy, Amal in his famous play, *The Post Office* (Dakghar 1912; tr.1914).<sup>29</sup> Rabindranath described how one corner of the roof of the rambling family home was his secret kingdom and of his adventurous voyages in the unused palanquin kept in the hall near the entrance of the house. He was an avid audience to the

<sup>25</sup> Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore—A Biography*, 2008, pp. 212–221.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> RNT, *My Boyhood Days*, tr. Marjorie Sykes, op. cit. p. 42.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> RNT, *Dakghar*, 1912; translated by Tagore in 1914. This play was a major break with the traditional proscenium theatre, and its very simplicity helps convey the vibrancy of a child's mind. William Radice, in Translator's Foreword in his translation, *The Post Office*, 2008, p. 10. mentions the fact, '...the play...its performance by Jewish children in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942, who were in the care of Janusz Korczak, a celebrated pediatrician and educationist ... influenced by Rabindranath's educational ideas.' This is seen as a testimony to the redemptive quality of the play.

stories told in the servants' quarters where most of the children of the household could be found. He recalled the wonderful stories narrated by one of the servants that thrilled him no end. He discovered the muse of poetry when he was very young and once he found her, there was no looking back—he had found himself and his vocation. He wrote, 'Like a young deer which butts here, there and everywhere with its newly sprouting horns, I made myself a nuisance with my budding poetry'<sup>30</sup>; very little of his early efforts have survived.

Engaged thus in exploring nature and his own self in the deepest ways, Rabindranath reached his youth. He seemed to emerge from the cocoon of the family environment to spread himself in the outer world. The Bengal renaissance, of which the Tagore household was like its hive, claimed the budding talent of Rabi. In 1875, Rabi recited his panegyric poem, an ode to his country, 'Bharatvarsha', at the gathering of the Hindu Mela, a sociopolitical organization playing an unforgettable role in the phase of the initial awakening and the development of nationalist consciousness in the country. It propagated the art, literature and music of the people. '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'.<sup>31</sup> The Hindu Mela was a precursor to the Indian National Congress under whose banner the freedom of the country was won. Many songs were composed for the sessions of the Hindu Mela; quite a number of songs came from the Tagore household. Rabindranath's poem, 'Bharatvarsha' (1875), was enthusiastically received and was published in the leading Anglo-Bengali weekly (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*).<sup>32</sup> The trend of reciting his poems in public began and so began his identity as a poet. His interest in literature also developed—it was the time of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novels that revolutionized the Bengali literary scene. Once again, we see the importance of the role of the press and the Bengali journals and magazines in which these novels and other writings appeared often in a serial form.

## 2.4 The Varied Roads to Education

Rabindranath's appearance on the Bengali literary horizon and being accorded a positive response right from his teenage years gave him the confidence to interact with other writers and poets. However, he was still not sure about what his future would shape up to and it was during this period of uncertainty, his family decided to send him to England with his third brother, Satyendranath who was a member of the Indian Civil Service, the first Indian to be so. Satyendranath's wife and two children had already settled themselves in England, and Satyendranath was waiting to wind up his administrative duties in Ahmedabad where he was posted. In order to prepare for his visit, Rabindranath went first to Ahmedabad where he gorged

---

<sup>30</sup> RNT, *My Reminiscences*, op. cit. p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 133.

<sup>32</sup> Krishna Kripalani, op. cit. p. 52.

himself on the wide selection of books in his brother's library and later to Bombay to stay with a family in order to learn European customs and English. Tagore's eldest brother, Dwijendranath, and his fifth brother, Jyotirindranath, started in 1877 the literary magazine, *Bharati*, in which a number of writings of Rabindranath appeared. Prior to his departure to England in September 1878, his writings that appeared in the magazine were included in books of poems such as *Kabikahini* (1878), *Banaphool* (1880) and *Saisab Sangit* (1884).<sup>33</sup> When in England, he was admitted to a school in Brighton and later to the University College, London. He did not complete any of his courses, but he wrote long letters home about his stay in England and visits to some European countries. In these letters collected in *Europeprobasir Patra (Letters of a Sojourner in Europe)*, we see the nascent stirrings of his ideas of education and the importance of travel as a means of broadening the understanding of different cultures. It was also the means by which he could see the advantages and disadvantages of each society, the English and the Bengali.<sup>34</sup>

Tagore developed a keen interest in Western music and also discovered his own special talent in this field. On his return home, he wrote a musical drama *Valmiki Pratibha* (The Genius of Valmiki) with songs set to tunes that were born out of a fusion of Indian and Western tunes borrowed from Irish, Scottish and English ballads. The musical drama was staged in 1881 in public in which Rabindranath played the role of Valmiki. This unleashed the vast reservoir of his songs that he wrote throughout his life and also set to music. He wrote more than 2,178 songs<sup>35</sup> to which he was very attached and predicted that he would live through these songs even if his body of literature was forgotten. 'I have introduced some new elements in our music.... This is a parallel growth to my poetry.... I get lost in my songs, and then I think that these are my best work; I get quite intoxicated. I often feel that, if all my poetry is forgotten, my songs will live with my countrymen, and have a permanent place'.<sup>36</sup> The range of his songs is like a rainbow, spanning the horizon of emotions, situations, spirituality, and patriotism, celebratory of seasons, philosophy, nature and drama. The tunes and beats are as varied, derived from the Indian classical traditions (*ragas*) of all corners of the country; folk tunes, melodies; and Western ballads.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Tagore comes into his youth armed with a reflective mind

<sup>33</sup> For further details, see Bhabatosh Dutta, 'Tagore: A Short Biography' in *Introduction to Tagore*, 1997, Kolkata, Visva-Bharati, p. 61.

<sup>34</sup> The collection of letters under the mentioned title was published serially in *Bharati*, 1879–1880; the letters translated as *Letters of a Sojourner in Europe* in 2008. An educationist, Bratin Chattopadhyay in *Sikshar Nirman: Prasanga Rabindranath*, 2012, marks the ninth letter in this collection as being significant in Tagore's ideas of education. We find in the letter, very progressive ideas of modern society and of the freedom of interactions of European men and women and the need for women, likewise in India to emerge out of their domestic confines. Tagore developed this theme in his celebrated novel *Ghare Baire*, later made into a film by Satyajit Ray in 1981.

<sup>35</sup> William Radice, 'Keys to the Kingdom: The Search for How Best to Understand and Perform the Songs of Rabindranath Tagore' in Kathleen M. O'Connell and Joseph T. O'Connell (eds.) *Rabindranath Tagore: Reclaiming a Cultural Icon*, 2009, p. 129.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, RNT Interview with Edward Thompson, 1926 as cited by William Radice, p. 123.

<sup>37</sup> Reba Som, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and his Song*, 2009, pp. 29–30.

and many talents that give his creativity room to play within himself and in many ways to be transmitted and transmute all those who came in contact with Tagore—they would be touched in some way or the other.

## 2.5 Tagore Entering the Public Space

Rabindranath came back to India at his father's behest in 1880 after a short stay of 17 months—it was clear that Tagore's stay in England would not come to any professional profit. He did not return with any degree or qualification. In 1883, he was married to a bride barely 10 years old and almost illiterate to whom he gave the name Mrinalini replacing her original name, Bhavatarini, a most unfashionable name by the standards of any day. Rabindranath was a little over 22 in age and he did not have any specific family responsibility. The only demand placed on him was by the editors of the journals who were his family members that he continue to fill the pages of the family magazines, *Balak* and *Bharati*; for the former, he wrote pieces for children, and for the latter, he wrote polemical pieces. His father, Devendranath, involved Rabindranath in the activities of the Adi Brahma Samaj, a religious reform movement founded by Devendranath, a departure from the original Brahma Sabha later known as Samaj founded by Raja Rammohun Roy in 1828. The Brahma Samaj was a well-thought-out ideology for religious reform and its appeal was to the educated urban elite. The Brahma Samaj believed in monotheism and was against idolatry, of any kind. Rabindranath's involvement in the work of the Samaj as the Secretary gave him the space and scope to discover his own spirituality and engage intellectually with institutional religion. Here too, we find an outpouring of writing, articles and essays in which he expressed his position on various issues of the day in a lucid and balanced manner. We find in Tagore a natural tendency to shun extreme views—in the matter of the Samaj, he never rejected the old nor accepted the new without qualification. If there was anything that he accepted in toto was his extreme love of nature, life, and humanity besides, unalloyed joy in his creative energy that he expressed with his whole being.

Rabindranath became a father when he was 25; the firstborn was a daughter, Madhurilata (Bela); 2 years later, his son, Rathindranath, was born and then his three other children (two daughters and a son). Other than Rathindranath and the youngest daughter, Meera, none of the children lived long. His father transferred the responsibility of looking after the family estates in the erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh) on to Rabindranath soon after he became a father. It may also be noted that by this time, Rabindranath was a poet who was now looked at with respect not only for the beauty of the poems but for the style, the innovation in rhyme and prosody and the content; there was maturity in his writing; his interest extended outwards from the self with a deep love of humanity and its triumphs and failures. He had certainly outgrown his effusive phase. '...on 3 November 1890 the poems of *Manasi* (Of the Mind) were published. Their wide range and sweep of thought, their lyrical beauty and strength (like a rider at ease on a spirited horse,

in firm control of his seat) convinced even his worst critics that here was indeed a poet. According to Edward Thompson, “the prevailing note of the book is quiet certainty; it marks his definite attainment of maturity”<sup>38</sup>.

The following facts are very significant in tracing the roots of Tagore’s educational work and journey as an educationist. Becoming a father meant assuming, the responsibility of educating his children and managing the estates brought him face to face with the realization of the family economics. In spite of the fact that there were many elder brothers and the traditional rule of primogeniture the accepted convention, Devendranath chose to pass over the reins of the family to the youngest son who was happy to be a poet. Here too, we encounter the very unconventional personality of Devendranath—he recognized the yet nascent but sterling qualities of perseverance and dutifulness that were increasingly seen in Tagore as he became older and embarked on his own projects. Rabindranath was ready to leave the cocoon of his protected and sheltered life under the umbrella of his father—he was always ready to stand up and be counted.

Prior to taking up his responsibility of the family estates, Rabindranath allowed his energies to take up anything that was set to him or that interested him—he was principally a poet and a writer though he did give his mind to topics and issues of his times. Once he came in contact with real rural life and was lured by the beauty of rural Bengal that we say he was inspired to come into his own, his creative energy became unbound and was poured into songs, stories, novels, poems, essays and ideas. ‘His literary work so far was based purely on idea and imagination. He now had the opportunity of living in close proximity to the life of the common folk. He had a direct and intimate experience of the life of the poor achieving an authentic knowledge of their social problems, their customs and rites and their general social manners. From the world of poetic fancy he descended into the immediacy of real life.’<sup>39</sup> This was the time that he contributed extensively to the magazine called *Sadhana* that had replaced *Bharati*.

In Selaidaha and Patisar, the locations of his family estates, Tagore started to think about education and looked for ways and means to provide education to his children. He also realized the importance of mass education but was not convinced that the British system of education available in the public domain was right for the Indian people. After his foray into ideas ‘educational’ and progressiveness in the letters written from Europe, there is no article so identified till 1892, when he wrote *Sikshar Herpher* or the Discrepancies of Education. Tagore now entered the first phase of his educational ideas and thinking. He had already undertaken some little experiments aimed at alleviating the miserable conditions of the poor villagers on his estates. The efforts were in education, health and sanitation, improved agriculture, access to potable water, a cooperative of farmers and other such measures. We see in these the seeds of the Rural Reconstruction programme that he started in 1922 in his university, Visva-Bharati.

<sup>38</sup> Krishna Kripalani, op. cit. p. 134 citing Edward Thompson who was an English critic and poet who regularly corresponded with Tagore and even translated some of his poems from original Bengali.

<sup>39</sup> Bhabatosh Dutta 1997, op. cit. p. 63.

Rabindranath's personal disillusion with schools during his childhood was a prime mover for the establishment of his school; the restlessness of his spirit and rejection of all kinds of parochialism or narrowness provided the impetus for the formation of Visva-Bharati, and his personal experiences of the miseries of Bengal peasantry sowed the seeds of his village extension work. These demonstrate his courage of independent thinking, of having the confidence in his impressions so as to act on them, his deep sensitivity and his immense capacity for hard work. He successfully sublimated his motives in varied constructive paths. Therein, we find an answer to his inner dynamism and life force from which we can learn and grow. His progression from one stage to another, the process of continuous growth and self-realization and his extension of his self outwards into the wider world took him on the journey of self-actualization and achieving a fullness of life seldom encountered in the world.

## References

- Acharya, P. (2009). *Banglar deshaj sikhshadhara*. Kolkata: Anustup.
- Andrews, C.F. (1996). *Letters from Abroad, Letters to a Friend*. In *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, (Vol. 3 pp. 221) (henceforth EWRT3). New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Basu, B. (1965). *Bangla Sisu Sahitya: Granthapanji (1818–1962)*. Calcutta: Bangiya Granthagar Parishad.
- Chattopadhyay, B. (2012). *Sikshar Nirman: Prasanga Rabindranath*. Kolkata: Anulekh.
- Dutta, B. (1997). A short biography of Tagore. In *Introduction to Tagore*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati.
- Kripalani, K. (2008). *Rabindranath Tagore—a biography*. New Delhi: UBSPD Pvt. Ltd.
- Macaulay, T.B. (1835). <http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/Macaulay001.htm> for the text of the minutes on education drawn up by T.B. Macaulay.
- Mukherjee, H. B. (2013). *Education for fullness: A study of the educational thought and experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*. India: Routledge.
- O'Connell, K. M. (2012). *Rabindranath Tagore poet as educator* (2nd Ed.). Kolkata: Visva-Bharati.
- Radice, W. (2009). Keys to the Kingdom: The search for how best to understand and perform the songs of Rabindranath Tagore. In K.M. O'Connell & J.T. O'Connell (Eds.), *Rabindranath Tagore: Reclaiming a cultural icon*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati.
- Radice, W. (1985). *Selected poems of Rabindranath Tagore*. UK: Penguin Books.
- Sadler Commission Report. (1832). [http://www.kkhsou.in/main/education/calcutta\\_university.html](http://www.kkhsou.in/main/education/calcutta_university.html).
- Som, R. (2009). *Rabindranath Tagore: The singer and his song*. India: Viking Penguin.
- Thompson, Edward. (1948). *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and dramatist* (2nd Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tagore, R. (1961). *Atmaparichay, Bichitra*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, p. 310.
- Tagore, R. (1988). In Anthony Soares (ed.) *Rabindranath Tagore: Lectures and addresses*. New Delhi: Macmillan India.
- Tagore, R. (2007). *Boyhood Days*, tr. Radha Chakravarty, India, Puffin, 2007.
- Tagore, R. (2008a). *My Reminiscences*, tr. Surendranath Tagore. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India, Pvt. Ltd.
- Tagore, R. (2008b). *Sojourner in Europe*, tr. Manjari Chakravarty, Supriya Roy (Ed.). Kolkata: Visva-Bharati

- Tagore, R. (Cited RNT) (2011). *My Boyhood Days*, tr. Marjorie Sykes (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, p. 36-37.
- Tagore, R. (Cited RNT) 'Rammohun', in EWRT3, pp. 667–669.
- Tagore, S. (1966). *Raja Ram Mohan Roy*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Vidyasagar, I.C. *Varnaparichay I*, 1854 & *Varnaparichay II*, 1855.
- Vivekananda, S. (1964). *The complete works of Swami Vivekananda* (Vol. 5). Kolkata: Advaita Ashram.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-00836-3>

Rabindranath Tagore

Adventure of Ideas and Innovative Practices in Education

Bhattacharya, K.

2014, XI, 107 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-00836-3