

Revisiting Humanism in Education: Insights from Tagore¹

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Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941),² who is famous for many reasons, had a long and significant career as a teacher and educationist as well. He set up unorthodox educational institutions and carried out several iconoclastic experiments on education, on a backdrop of British colonial rule in India. But since this was about a century ago and those institutions exist now only in name, one could rightly ask whether his ideas are of value today. If the ideas are still current, why did the institutions disappear or have to change with time?

This contradiction can be explained by pointing out that his ideas were actually prescient – they weren't sustained because they were ahead of their time. Besides, although he correctly identified problems and designed effective solutions, the problems were not fully solved by those solutions – because of asymmetrical power relations and lack of funding. These aspects have been analysed extensively by many excellent commentators and biographers (see bibliography). But the problems haven't gone away. Today, we see the same problems throughout the globe – in all their enormity, reach and complexity. They engulf us, and in a way blind us, because we have been trained to think that the reasons underlying them are 'natural givens'. And by a quirk of fate, the solutions are now hidden in the sands of time.

As an illustration, there are elements of humanistic education in Tagore's ideas, even though humanistic education itself was recognised only some decades after his death and still hasn't permeated widely.

This essay is an exploration of his educational philosophy and its currency, from the viewpoint of humanistic education.

The current education landscape

This essay starts with a proposition. Education in today's world needs a fundamental reposturing – not because it is doing its job badly but because it is doing the *wrong* job. Everywhere we can see educational institutions doing a great job, but our society is no better for it. This state of affairs hasn't risen suddenly or recently; rather, it has been emerging slowly and developing over a century or so.

1 Adapted from the 34th J.E. Jayasuriya Memorial Lecture, delivered on 14 February 2025 at the SLFI Auditorium, Colombo. The writer wishes to acknowledge Professor Narada Warnasuriya for helpful comments on a preliminary draft of the lecture.

2 His actual name in Bengali is Robindronat Thakur: the name Rabindranath Tagore is an anglicisation, much better known across the world than the Bengali original.

Let us examine the last one hundred years or so. During this time, throughout the world, democratisation has given expanding access to education, decolonisation has helped to switch the medium of instruction from colonising languages to mother tongues, expanding industries and middle class populations have led to increasing massification of university education, and the human capital theory has led to increasing investment and growth in all levels of education. Can anyone think of a better century for education?

But during this same period, what has education given society? Chemists invented the weapons of the First World War. Physicists invented the weapons of the Second World War. Biologists bequeathed us biological weapons. Medicine became more successful and less trustworthy. Economics created economic hit men and cross-border practices that made markets volatile and national economies vulnerable. The law reduced community rights and increased patent rights. Mass communications, which could not give populations any democratic skills, could nevertheless give them insatiable consumerism. Social scientists have not explained the underlying reasons, much less solve them, but continue to examine or create fault-lines in societies that fragment them. The humanities have failed to bring the human family closer. And the biggest invention that technology has given us thus far is climate change.

It would not be enough to merely put the blame for all this on a few demagogues or dictators – throughout this period, populations have at least acquiesced with them and have often strengthened them. The purpose of education should have been to give the masses the skill to avoid these traps, but instead, the masses have been compliant while the experts have been selling their souls. Intriguingly, during this whole period, policymakers and educationists have mostly been genuine in their intentions. This is the basis for the proposition.

Some early commentators on this aspect were the iconoclastic social critic Ivan Illich, who published the book *Deschooling Society* (1970), and a relatively unknown American education administrator, Grant Venn.

Venn pointed out that throughout the twentieth century, the role that was *required* of education in society was undergoing a gradual change, although its *response* was not forthcoming. The general organisational structure of education everywhere was one that had been inherited from the time of the Industrial Revolution, but changing times were demanding a new structure. But educationists everywhere were not perceptive to this. They merely kept the old structure and tried to tinker with it.

In the old days, the majority of schoolchildren were destined to end up in farms, mines or manufactories, and they only needed an education in the 3 Rs and some basic disciplines such as punctuality. Only a few had to be selected and groomed for higher office. Learning how to live well, on the other hand, was acquired quite easily outside of school. The school itself played a relatively small role in people's lives,

except for the select few, and nobody would have equated education to school-going, because much of education happened outside school. Our organisational structure was one that was created for this era.

But all this changed after the increasing domination of scientific technology in society. Thereafter, more schoolchildren had to be educated to a higher level – as tasks transformed from physical ones to cognitive ones, ‘work’ transformed into ‘jobs’, and the preparation needed for a life transformed from apprenticeship to prolonged schooling. Schools became a pervasive presence in people’s lives and tied them to their destinies, both individually and nationally. Gradually, education became equated to school-going – learning how to live well, which had been learnt outside school, became sidelined, ignored and eventually lost.

As Venn (1971) observed:

[C]hanges now confronting us must be thought about in terms of certain new relationships that have developed between man, education, and society. Essentially, for the first time in man’s history, education is the link between an individual and society; and for the first time this is true for every individual. Education, instead of a *selection* agency, must become an *including* agency. (p. 339; emphasis added)

When he suggested here that education must change from a selection agency to an including agency, he wasn’t talking about *access* to education – he was worried about what would happen to school-leavers when they go to live in the world outside.

If one looked back at how education did respond, one would see that it has been preoccupied with strengthening the link between school and work. Sri Lanka itself adopted pre-vocational studies in the 1970s, life skills in the 1980s, soft skills in the 1990s, and twenty-first century skills in the 2000s. Nowadays one speaks of industry-based capstone projects, entrustable professional activities, etc. By and large, these were global responses replicated locally.

But even these had no chance of success, because while education could prepare school-leavers for jobs, the economy still had to create those jobs. Without that, all one could have is what Ronald Dore (1976) forewarned us: qualification inflation and qualification escalation. In the 1960s the human capital theory suggested that education could serve as a springboard for economic development, and there were indeed some early successes, such as with Japan and South Korea. But more recently, that theory too has run into controversy and failure (see, for example, Brown et al [2020]).

The failure to adapt to these changing circumstances has led to what we see today in its fully developed form. We have over-indulged ourselves in designing education for the workplace, and compromised its role in preparing students to be citizens in the community. This is not to say that education should not have played a role in economic development or preparing its students for work. It is to point out

the loss of balance in achieving these two goals: economic development and human flourishing.

But while education may have lost sight of the second goal (human flourishing), it also didn't do very well promoting the first goal (economic development). Even here, it has lost its way.

After the Cold War ended in the 1990s, a more balanced use of technology – what used to be known in the 1970s as 'appropriate technology' – was replaced by the use of often highly expensive and inappropriate technology that came tied to funding. This was because the global economy was capitulating to the major industries and multinational corporations and conglomerates (which were initially situated in the West but are now situated in other countries too). We can conceptualise these as the 'core' in the 'core-periphery relationship' in global financing, knowledge production and commoditisation.

The reason why education lost its way is because that too became merged with – and disappeared into – this core-periphery relationship. Education ceased to serve local communities or support appropriate technology, and instead began serving the interests of big industries and promoting inappropriate technological behemoths.

One of the interesting changes in education that was promoted by the World Bank in the 1990s was the concept of the 'three E's' of education: effectiveness, equity and efficiency. They were meant to help align educational systems to national goals. But they were overly quantitative, promoting measurable outcomes and ignoring the unmeasurable ones. What they succeeded in doing is replacing the broad goals of education with immediately measurable performance indicators. Thus, quality was pushed aside in favour of effectiveness, and value-for-money in favour of efficiency. Insidiously, everyone began chasing after the measurable parameters that served the industries in the core countries. Today, academia is judged by their indices, such as webometrics, accreditations and citations.

Even before these quantitative indices emerged, Venn asked some insightful questions about 'quality'. Can quality be measured based on *how well the institution serves those most in need of education* rather than only those who are lucky, or defined in terms of *how well individual differences and unique talents are developed* rather than how well students become like all others, or in terms of *one's behaviour and contributions after one leaves school* rather than on what one does while in school? Can accreditation be based on *how well the school succeeds in its own goals* rather than those of other schools? Can status for an educational institution be gained by *how well it meets unfilled needs of society* rather than how much it is like recognised institutions? We have lost these unmeasurable attributes in our rush to comply with measurable parameters.

But it is not merely that this approach has robbed society of important attributes that were unmeasurable. Arguably, even those who were ‘successfully educated’ lack a wholesome education. This had been noted even before the 1990s, as when Aldous Huxley (1954) wrote in his book *Psychedelics*:

Literary or scientific, liberal or specialist, all our education... fails to accomplish what it is supposed to do. Instead of transforming children into fully developed adults, it turns out students of the natural sciences who are completely unaware of Nature as the primary fact of experience, it inflicts upon the world students of the Humanities who know nothing of humanity, their own or anyone else’s.
(p. 63-64)

So what kind of *different* organisational structure would help us achieve this balance? Illich (1970) hints at the answer:

Everyone learns how to live[,] outside school. We learn to speak, to think, to love, to feel, to play, to curse, to politick and to work without interference from a teacher... Increasingly, educational research demonstrates that children learn most of what teachers pretend to teach them from peer groups, from comics, from chance observations,...” (p. 35)

– and to this, today one could add ‘from social media and the Internet’.

In other words, although the education-industry link is important, we need to realise that education itself is a lot more than this role. In order to capture the other important goals of education, we must broad-base it. Education is not something that happens only in the syllabus; it happens outside it too. It is not something that is destined to enter only the workplace; it enters our private lives and community life too. In fact, its true value may lie therein. We need to rediscover this balance.

It is when we begin to see the true role of education in this way that we can begin to see sense in Tagore’s ideas.

Tagore

Tagore was born to a wealthy Bengali family in British colonial India in the year 1861. This was a time of great social transformation in India, involving political, social, religious and literary movements. In his youth he saw the organisational structure that I described in its formative days, and immediately realised how it is unsuited for anything except the British colonial plans. In particular, he appreciated the strengths of traditional Indian education such as the *gurukula*, *ashrama* and *tapovana* systems, the value of the aesthetic sense to human growth, and the role of the environment in our lives. He placed a huge importance on emotions and social values, and decried materialism and hedonism. Always explaining his ideas through brilliant similes, he said: “The timber merchant may think that flowers and foliage are only frivolous decorations for a tree, but he will know to his cost that if these are eliminated, the timber follows them.” (Iyengar 1987: 101)

But he also saw the value of the science and technology that the British were bringing in. He wasn't a simplistic indigene fighting to chase the British out. He wanted to combine the good of both the old and the new, both India and the world. Tagore was a great harmoniser of ideas and an incorrigible optimist.

Maitra (2014) identified three phases in Tagore's experimental journey on education, which altogether lasted approximately fifty years, from the 1890s to the 1940s. In the first phase, roughly from the 1890s to the 1910s, he thought of education as 'freedom to learn,' in contradistinction to the kind of straightjacketed rote-learning that British colonial education had introduced to India. He also fought for education in the mother tongue instead of English. This was the time Tagore set up the Brahmacharyashrama, a school for boys in Santiniketan.³ In the second phase, from the 1910s to the 1930s, he thought of education as 'freedom from ignorance and want' and as a powerful tool to emancipate humanity from poverty, superstition and suffering. This was the time when he set up the Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan, his version of a university, as well as Sriniketan, his effort at rural upliftment. And in the third phase, from the 1930s until his death in 1941, which was the time when Visva-Bharati was flourishing, he thought of education as an internationalist, humanist project or 'freedom from bondage', in contradistinction to nationalism. This essay will follow Tagore's journey in this sequence and his educational philosophy.

Humanistic education

The common thread that runs through Tagore's journey is his commitment to humanistic education – a term that actually became popular only after his death, following the work of educational psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers.

Humanistic education is the application of the principles of humanism or humanistic philosophy to education. It is important to note that humanism is not the same as some concepts with which it is often conflated – such as humanitarianism, humaneness or the humanities. In essence, humanism believes in the primacy of human agency, or the belief that humans are in charge of their own destinies; it is an Enlightenment idea that took agency away from divinity and placed it in the hands of the human being. (But of course, it is also part of some ancient philosophies.) But it identifies this agency as a responsibility both to oneself and one's society rather than as a libertarian license. The ideal of humanism is human flourishing – not hedonism, nor any goal in the afterlife.

In humanism, human beings are considered independent, inherently good and capable of positive growth. One might look at these assumptions somewhat cynically – but it is hard to deny these qualities to a newborn child who has arrived on this world in all its innocence. As Tagore once famously said, "Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man."

3 He also started a school for girls, but this had to be abandoned after his wife's untimely death.

As Ratna Navaratnam (1958) wrote:

Humanism takes as its dominant pattern the progress of the individual from helpless infancy to self-governing maturity...The child is put at the centre of the picture and the educator judges the truth of any theory and the success of any system, by the contribution it makes to the transformation of creative childhood into creative manhood. (p. 92)

Humanistic education has several features:

The student is given a free choice to decide what to study, how and for how long, within reason. As a result, the motivation to learn is intrinsic, rather than extrinsic goals such as exams, grades or certificates.

The educational experience is left open, exploratory and self-driven. There is little or no emphasis on a curriculum, syllabus or what we today call 'intended learning outcomes'.

The setting for learning is safe. What the teacher does is provide the student with the resources to quench curiosity and play a supportive and facilitatory role, as a resource person and guide. There is no coercion, judgement, criticism or punishment.

The learning environment focuses on both cognitive and emotional aspects of the learning experience; in other words, both 'knowing' and 'feeling' are considered valid and important to the learning process. Tagore himself summed up the role of emotions for both learning and life:

...[I]t can be said that an idea or emotion lies under all kinds of endeavours and actions. If the former is lacking, the taproot of human activity is severed and withers away[,] though rules and regulations, funds and committees may abound. (Maitra 2014: 63)

At least a significant proportion of time is spent in contact with nature rather than inside a classroom.

Phase 1: 'Freedom to learn'

Tagore was urged to experiment with education because he saw the unsatisfactory nature of schools, which he described as "...educational factories, lifeless, colourless, dissociated from the context of the universe, within bare white walls, staring like eyeballs of the dead...It provided information and knowledge for the intellectual growth and it neglected the aspects of human growth." (Samuel Ravi 2024: 166)

He explained:

The way we understand it, the word school means an education factory or mill of which the schoolmaster is a part. The bell goes off at half past ten and the mill begins to work. As the mill starts, the master also keeps spouting off. The mill closes at four o'clock. The master too, stops spouting and the students return home, their heads stuffed with factory-made lessons. Later, at the time of examinations, these lessons are evaluated and stamped.

The advantage of factory production is that the products are exactly made to a standard and the products of different factories differ but little from one another. So, it is easy to grade them. But individuals differ a great deal from one another. Even an individual may not be the same from one day to the next. Even so, a man cannot get from machines what he gets from another man. A machine produces, it can't give. It can supply oil, but it can't light a lamp. (Maitra 2014: 65)

Tagore's journey was dedicated to find a suitable alternative to such factory-style education.

He disliked uniformity and intellectual dominance in education, and preferred freedom to do, experience, feel and learn. This is especially noteworthy today, because educational psychologists have since found the importance of the affective domain for learning: the so-called cognitive-emotional model of learning.

Importantly, the reason he liked a more active style of learning is not merely because it is better for assimilation or long-term memory – as we are accustomed to think today – but because it promoted the growth of individual talents and tastes and imparted a communitarian rather than an individualistic outlook to life.

He also preferred a more idyllic, rural setting to educate children, because he felt that cities and towns rob the students of their bonding with nature, which was necessary for the growing mind to grow freely, wholistically and strongly. This also included creating opportunities for social contact with the rural folk, and trying to help the villagers at least in small ways. So he was especially keen that school and society were welded together. That was his way of teaching two things: first, communication skills (for which today, we conduct skills sessions with trained surrogates in classrooms), and second, a sense of social service (for which we use small group discussions, reflective writing, etc. in classrooms).⁴

To Tagore, the school-society link was also necessary to impart moral virtues: It is utterly futile to expect that the preaching of a few textbook precepts... at school will set right everything when countless varieties of dishonesty and perversity are destroying decency and taste every moment in today's artificial life. This only results in different kinds of hypocrisy and insolent flippancy in the name of morality... (Maitra 2014: 70)

We can see today how textbook-based teaching of virtues has led to hypocrisy among those who do wrong with impunity, flippancy among those who allow wrongs to happen as if it is the norm, and cynicism among those who try to reconcile what they see with what they were taught in classrooms.

In Sri Lanka today, although some of Tagore's humanistic ideas are in practice in pre-school and primary education, the bottleneck effect of exams has throttled them, by the competitiveness and the rush to obtain certificates.

4 It would be interesting to compare this to a similar local experiment: Dr C.W.W. Kannangara's Handessa rural education scheme. For an excellent account, see Gunasekara (2013).

This has enormous implications to our own education system. What Tagore taught us – by not judging learning through exams – is that if we had exams, much of what we expect students to learn would be ignored because they are not specifically assessed in the exams. The reason we want exams is because we want to compare student with student. But how can we do this if each student is a unique person? What do we value greater: the comparison or the uniqueness? We must be careful when answering this question – often it turns out that our answer is actually not that of the educationist but that of the industrialist, and not that of our society's but that of the countries in the core of knowledge production.

Phase 2: 'Freedom from ignorance and want'

His first lesson here is to tailor education to our own needs, rather than import and transplant an educational system from elsewhere. Tagore himself was, of course, warning about the dangers of blindly following the British system. This is an excellent testament for what we today call contextual knowledge or conditional knowledge.

He pointed out that we cannot do this if we merely asked our teachers to do what international experts advise. We must study our own society, our own past practices and experiments, how they have succeeded or failed and why, what would work for us now and so on. Tagore said:

Only when we are able to channel the current of education in our country through the numerous experiments of numerous teachers, it will become a natural thing of the country. Only then will we come across real teachers here and there, now and then. Only then a tradition, a succession of teachers will naturally follow. We cannot invent a particular educational system by labelling it as 'national'. We can call 'national' only education of that kind which is being conducted in a variety of ways through a variety of endeavours by a variety of our countrymen...When a particular education system seeks to fasten a static ideal on to the country, we cannot call it 'national'. It is communal and therefore, fatal to the country. (Maitra 2014: 117-118)

Indeed, such a uniform education system is worse than communal – at best it would facilitate pedantry, at worst it could even facilitate totalitarianism and fascism.

Secondly, Tagore was keen to point out that when times change, the same energy needs to be spent on amending our systems and practices. In one speech he used a beautiful simile: he likened time to a river, and said that people who don't change with changing times are like the people who would not change the position of the ferry even after the river has changed its position. He asked, How can they cross the river from the old ferry? This would be great advice for a country that still runs its educational system dictated to by policies that are over eighty years old.

The third lesson is his trust in science and technology – but only appropriate technology – as well as his disdain for outdated traditions, superstitions and rituals. In this sense, he was remarkably modern. He said:

When in the East we were busy calling upon the ghostbuster in case of disease, the astrologer to placate hostile planets in case of trouble, worshipping the goddess Sitala to ward off smallpox and similar epidemics, and practising home-grown black magic to get rid of enemies, in the West a woman asked Voltaire: ‘I have heard one can kill whole flocks of sheep by chanting a mantra?’ Voltaire replied: ‘It can certainly be done, but an adequate supply of arsenic along with it is also required.’ It cannot be absolutely ruled out that a modicum of faith in magic and the supernatural still persists in isolated pockets in Europe, but a trust in the efficacy of arsenic in this connection is almost universal there. That is why they can kill us whenever they want to and we are liable to die even when we do not want to. (Maitra 2014: 165)

Tagore was wise enough to note that the British colonial government was actually quite keen to *deny* Indians this gift of science and technology. He pointed out that the colonial colleges and universities actually functioned with many constraints and limitations imposed by it. One of the main hopes that Tagore had in establishing Visva-Bharati was overcoming this. He knew that foreigners, both western and eastern, yearn to come to India to learn about her strong and vibrant achievements in the humanities. He welcomed them. In return, he also created space for Indians to come there and learn what the West had to teach – which, of course, was mainly science. This was the confluence of East and West that Tagore envisaged for Visva-Bharati. Arguably, Tagore’s plan in combining the strength in our humanities with the strength in science and technology of other lands within our educational system could be useful here too.

Tagore also created Sriniketan and its Institute of Rural Reconstruction, a rural upliftment programme using what would later come to be called ‘appropriate technology’. This was not a blind exercise in importing European machines and gadgets like fans or floor polishers. Instead, it was an attempt to solve the problems faced by the rural folk, by using scientific knowledge and appropriate technological tools. It included components such as rural education, village sanitation, roving dispensaries, anti-malaria and child welfare schemes, cooperative societies, scientific agriculture, experimental farming, dairy farming, weaving, tannery, smithy, carpentry and other projects. It was designed to promote self-confidence and self-help and eliminate ignorance and superstition among the villagers. As Tagore described his educational mission:

Our centre of culture should not only be the centre of intellectual life of India, but the centre of her economic life as well. It must cultivate land, breed cattle, to feed itself and its students; it must produce all necessities, devising the best

means and using the best materials, calling science to its aid. Its very success would depend on the success of its industrial ventures carried out on the co-operative principle; which will unite the teachers and students in a living and active bond of necessity. This will also give us a practical, industrial training, whose motive is not profit. (Neogy 2010: xiv)

When the time came for Tagore to send his son Rathindranath for higher education, he sent him not to Oxford but to learn agricultural science at Illinois: “Indians should learn to become better farmers in Illinois than better ‘gentlemen’ in Oxford” (Neogy 2010: xiv). Similarly, he sent the children of his relatives and friends, including his son-in-law, to learn other skills, such as scientific dairy-keeping, the cooperative movement and rural medical systems.

Tagore’s educational philosophy was not merely bookish but also practical, not merely ideological but also pragmatic, not merely effective but also of quality, and not merely focused on the individual but also the community. We can see that it was not pedantic but contextual, not blind but appropriate, and not profit-oriented but promoting human flourishing.

One often has difficulty understanding why Tagore, in spite of his appreciation of science and disdain for superstition, still lavishly exalted his traditional deities and the scriptures. Arguably, he may have seen a remarkable practical utility in them for the organisation of society and the innumerable lessons they carried for human conduct – for which science and technology, or even modern administration, had not yet furnished any suitable alternative.

Besides, it is clear that he admired religion’s potential to bring peoples together. In *The Religion of Man* (Iyengar 1987: 102), he wrote: “On the surface of our being we have the ever-changing phases of the individual self, but in the depth there dwells the Eternal Spirit of human unity beyond our direct knowledge.” But of course, religion seldom brought humanity together. And whenever it played the divisive role, he did not blindly follow its precepts.

Fourthly, Tagore had an important answer to the question of whether the economic or the political should enjoy the primacy of place, in designing educational policy. He said: “Economic life covers the whole base of society, because its necessities are simplest and the most universal. Educational institutions, in order to obtain the fullness of truth, must have close association with this economic life.” (Neogy 2010: xxvii)

Fifthly, the most sticky issue in India for the modern philosopher is probably its caste system, and Tagore had no qualms about repudiating it:

...[D]ifferentiation and separation of vocations and trades, professions and callings on which the caste system originally rested has become totally extinct and it is altogether impossible to maintain it any longer. Yet all the taboos, external restrictions and customs associated with the *varna* system are still

in place, static and intact. It seems we must put up with the cage with all its iron bars and fetters though the bird for which it was made is dead and gone. We provide bird feed every day but no bird feeds on it. In this way, due to the cleavage between our social life and social customs, we are not only being inhibited and obstructed by unnecessary, outmoded arrangements, we cannot live up to our professed social ideals, either. (Maitra 2014: 114-115)

What he has said of ‘caste system’ would apply equally well to our own ‘outmoded arrangements’ such as astrology, superstitious rituals and harmful so-called healing practices. Sadly, our populace is filled with superstition, myth and pseudoscience – a cursory glance at the supplements of any weekend Sinhala newspaper shows this. Here, the high literacy rate actually works *against* the nation! Our public intellectuals must also take the blame, because they have failed to sustain the good work that had been done in the 1970s by intellectuals like Dr E.W. Adikaram, Abraham Kovoov and Professor Carlo Fonseka.

A sixth point in his ideas is his desire to see education as a tool for everyone, not just the educated few. Reminding us on ancient Indian education and learning, he said:

There was a regular traffic between specialised knowledge and ordinary knowledge. Scholars, pundits or learned society did not have an antithetical relationship with the less learned segments of society...There was hardly a place in the country where the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranic myths and religious discourse did not spread in a variety of ways. Even the theoretical philosophical issues which were rigorously, relentlessly discussed and debated in philosophy and metaphysics always filtered down to the mind of the people...In those days learning was the asset of the entire society and not the acquisition of the learned few. (Maitra 2014: 207)

In our own country, expanded access to education has not had this desired effect. In spite of decades of education in swabhasha and universal access, knowledge is a tool of separation, seclusion and self-aggrandisement for the few who win the lottery. Is this the fault of the education or the educated? The educated use their learning as a weapon rather than as a tool to serve, but this is a manifestation of the fierce competitiveness and the fixed mindset that pervades the minds of the successful products of our education, and is therefore the result of education. As Tagore pointed out:

The rains of our education are falling a long distance away from where the roots of our whole life lie...Our ordinary daily life has no use for the education we acquire...It is unjust to blame this on students. Their world of books and the world in which they live everyday are poles apart...That is why it is seen that the same person who has formidable erudition in European philosophy, science and ethics tenaciously clings to the age old superstitions...We are no

more amazed when we see that on the one hand he is separately enjoying literature full of varied sentiments while on the other he is busy only with making money... (Maitra 2014: 35)

Phase 3: 'Freedom from bondage'

Tagore's role and position as an unrepentant internationalist at the time when India was demanding *swaraj* is well known. He was opposed to nationalism, and in fact correctly identified colonialism itself as a manifestation of the nationalism of the British – so he asked, if one were anti-colonialist, how could one be nationalist also?

But his internationalism was not a rootless existence floating aimlessly in the air. He was clear that one must be rooted in one's own soil, strongly and firmly – it is from here that one must reach out to the wealth of the world. In another beautiful simile, he urged us not to fear the wind, and to open the windows of our house to let that wind in. He asked us to retain the good that the wind blew in and get rid of the bad. He said that as long as our house had a firm foundation, the wind will not blow it away. Therefore, the first step of being an internationalist is studying one's own soil and placing a firm foundation for one's existence. He admired and studied tradition without being a traditionalist.

With regard to Indian universities of his day, he lamented the fact that these were European grafts and nothing like India's ancient intellectual heritage, such as Nalanda, Wikramshila or Taksila. He lamented the type of intellectual this would produce. He wrote in 1932:

We receive European learning as something static and immutable and consider it the height of modernity to cull and recite sentences from it. For this reason we lack the courage to reconsider it or think about it from a new angle. Our universities have nothing to do with and are cut off from the acute questions, dire necessities and extreme hardship facing the people of the country...Like parasites our mind, attached to text books, has lost its ability to find its food and invent by itself. (Maitra 2014: 200)

These words seem no less relevant to our own universities, 90 years after they were written.

Tagore's belief in internationalism and its effect on his philosophy of education is captured by his description of Visva-Bharati, the higher education institute he set up in 1921 using the Nobel Prize money (Neogy 2010: 90): "Visva-Bharati represents India where she has her wealth of mind which is for all. Visva-Bharati acknowledges India's obligation to offer to others the hospitality of her best culture and India's right to accept from others their best."

Conclusion

It is remarkable that Rabindranath Tagore has explored education's problems even before they fully emerged, and enacted tangible (if unsustained) solutions, with little formal support or recognition, even before humanistic education had emerged as a force. While his solutions need not, or cannot, be resurrected in their original form today, his explorations could yield useful lessons and provide inspiration to follow new lines of thinking and identify alternatives and solutions that are appropriate for today.

His story highlights how, across time and space, an application of the principles of humanistic education can both explain education's current problems and usefully point out solutions.

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