

Tagore's Ideas on Humanistic Education as a Civilizational Burden: Response to Panduka Karunanayake

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I listened to my friend, Prof. Panduka Karunanayake's lecture, 'Revisiting Humanism in Education: Insights from Tagore' on 14th February 2025 in Colombo. Karunanayake, in my view, is one of the few reflective thinkers from Sri Lanka's university system who does not mind expressing himself reflectively in the public domain, outside of his discipline and is not overly constrained by ideological commitments. His lecture encapsulated these considerations. But I was curious why he was focusing on Tagore's thought at the present advanced stage in the 21st century, especially since Tagore's ideas held sway in the late 19th to mid-20th century. Is he timeless in his thought? Was there no other system of thought that might have reflected upon humanism in education better? While these questions rose in my mind, Tagore remains one of my favorite authors too.

Karunanayake argues that the problem is not that education across the world "is doing its job badly" but [because] "it is doing the *wrong* job." He further notes, "everywhere we can see educational institutions doing a great job, but our society is no better for it." While I accept that education has improved in many parts of the world in so far as the quantum of knowledge that might be imparted, I doubt if that general advancement can be easily encapsulated in this generalization. But Karunanayake knows this too. Hence, his assertion that education is doing the "*wrong* job" and "our society is no better for it." The present world – from our own chaotic recent past lacking in both ethics and commonsense in our day-to-day encounters and the dynamics of contemporary national politics and life in South Asia and beyond – establishes this feeling of dismay as a matter of fact. The violence against the hapless citizens in Gaza by Israel amid the silence of governments around the world, along with multilateral bodies and the kind of global and local politics currently practiced by the United States of America still calling itself the 'leader of the free world', are merely a handful of instances that exemplifies this situation. Given this undeniable state of affairs in both our country and the rest of the world, Karunanayake's anxiety over education not doing its job right, and therefore the need to make it more humanistic, is not only well-founded but also necessary. It is towards this end that he invokes the ideas of Tagore.

Karunanayake has a very clear notion of what he means by humanism. This is important because similar to words like fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism, humanism too is a term that is often misunderstood across the world. As I have indicated elsewhere, many such "terms are simultaneously known and patently

unknown”¹ across multiple discursive contexts. According to Karunanayake, “humanism believes in the primacy of human agency, or the belief that humans are in charge of their own destinies.” That is, it is a notion that has “taken the agency away from divinity and placed it in the hands of the human being.” And this agency is understood “as a responsibility both to oneself and one’s society rather than as a libertarian license.” As he further explains, “the ideal of humanism is human flourishing – not hedonism, nor any goal in the afterlife.” I do not believe anyone today would disagree with this position. But this is also where the problem lies and hence Karunanayake’s dilemma. That is, while systems of knowledge and their potential benefits have expanded and even improved, it does not necessarily mean that the core responsibility given to people through the idea of humanism has been taken seriously or even recognized. Though Karunanayake himself does not say it so bluntly, the problem is that, humanism as a value understood in this way is not part of any major education system in the world. The question is, why not? Did it even matter in the time of Tagore when he established educational Institutions such as Visva Bharati in Shantiniketan in present day West Bengal? Karunanayake identifies three phases in Tagore’s sense of humanistic education (even though he himself did not use this term):

1. Freedom to learn
2. Freedom from ignorance and want
3. Freedom from bondage

It should be obvious that what Karunanayake proposes as humanistic education cannot blossom unless education systems pay attention to the approaches put forward by Tagore. But the values that underlie these considerations do not necessarily come only from Tagore’s time and contexts or from the Enlightenment within which formal understandings of humanistic education find genesis. These ideas are much broader. They are also located in various forms in ancient Jain and Buddhist thought, as in what is suggested in the ‘Kalama Sutta’ - often referred to today as a ‘charter of free inquiry’² - as well as broader patterns of thinking that led to the emergence of specific schools of thought in our region, such as the Cārvāka philosophy of materialism in 600 BCE.³ In other words, without exercising the freedom to learn, being free from ignorance and bondage, within whatever temporal and contextual limitations that may be in place or with the benefit of epistemic breaks that might allow them to go beyond these restrictions and embrace such freedoms, civilizations, schools or bodies of thought cannot evolve in any real sense.

1 <https://lawandotherthings.com/secularism-as-misdirection-response-by-sasanka-perera/>

2 https://buddho.org/kalama-sutta-the-buddhas-charter-of-free-inquiry/?psafe_param=1&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=22586450096&gbraid=0AAAAACYUh4JMwwMQ7H6_CY0DUIwTCWroM&gelid=CjwKCAjwr5_CBhBIEiwAzfwYuCkunVCcCZByDCbdCkkyzTV5R57qSlj-EYSxEJzkPORqw40uzPHyxhoC5HUQAvD_BwE

3 For more information, read, Pradeep P. Gokhale, *Lokāyata/Cārvāka: A Philosophical Inquiry*. London: Oxford University Press, 2015.

What I am trying to argue is, what Karunanayake traces to Tagore is something far broader than Tagore or his time even though he articulated these ideas more clearly than most others of his time. And it is what he wrote that still survives rather than the many institutional-building efforts undertaken in his own time, a fact that Karunanayake also recognizes. Much later in the 20th century, Jiddu Krishnamurti observed this in his essay, ‘Education and the Significance of Life’: “governments want efficient technicians, not human beings because human beings become dangerous to governments—and to organized religions as well. That is why governments and religious organizations seek to control education.”⁴ Again, like Tagore, Krishnamurthi is an articulator of a civilizational necessity, residues of which were already a part of the thinking particularly in our part of the world as well as post-Enlightenment thinking in general, but disregarded by history, convenience, power and cultural impediments. It is now the right time to pose the question, why Tagore, why now, and whether this focus on humanistic education in his thinking makes sense today?

I agree with Karunanayake that humanistic education is a necessity for our times and for the future too. This is because this is a civilizational necessity. This necessity would be apparent by simply surveying the work of the iconic dismantlers of human history and democratic institutions from Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini in the 20th century and Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu in the 21st century to most established political leaders in our region who bear different degrees of culpability. In my mind, these individuals exemplify the consequences of not being exposed to a humanistic education and understanding its nuances and responsibilities. In their hands, humanism’s primary goal – human flourishing – has been met by its decisive negation. While accepting Tagore’s articulation of these ideas which have been documented well by Karunanayake, it is more important to ask why his efforts failed and have instead become constantly deployed slogans from a well-articulated but often disregarded history.

Karunanayake notes early in his lecture that it is possible for one to argue that Tagore “carried out his iconoclastic experiments in education a century ago, and that the educational institutions that he created back then exist now only in name” and “their original nature has changed with the rigors of time.”⁵ This is true. Visva-Bharati in Shantiniketan that he established, among many other things to impart what we might call today a humanistic education, has failed the mission Tagore had given it, and survives today merely as yet another university controlled by India’s central government. Karunanayake’s explanation is, “that his ideas were actually prescient

4 Perera, Sasanka. 2009. ‘Bringing the Thinking of Jiddu Krishnamurti into Politics.’ In, Sasanka Perera, Dev Nath Pathak and Ravi Kumar eds., *Against the Nation: Thinking Like South Asians*. London and New Delhi: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing

5 Quoted from the original text of the 34th J.E. Jayasuriya Memorial Lecture, 14 February 2025.

– they weren’t sustained, because they weren’t adequately appreciated, because they were ahead of their time.” He further observes that even though Tagore “correctly identified problems and designed effective solutions, the problems were not fully solved by them – because of asymmetrical power relations and lack of funding.”

I have no major disagreement with Karunanayake regarding this general explanation. And I certainly agree that Tagore’s ideas, some of which I have also tried to live by – but unfortunately have failed – remain crucial to our times, as I will explain later. I also think why I failed as a person to live by his ideas and why his thinking has since been reduced to slogans and quotations even as we accept the value of their meanings need to be clearly understood. This goes beyond the issue of his ideas not being properly appreciated or being ahead of his time. As I tried to explain earlier, some of the broader repositories of knowledge and traditions from which Tagore also drew in his time tend to be far broader and much older than his time. While underfunding and lapses in planning as Karunanayake articulates were a serious problem, compared to the institutional-building efforts of Jiddu Krishnamurti and his followers, the main problem was, and remains a **civilizational burden**. His ideas of humanistic education were never ‘mainstreamed’ even as their value and rationale were often flippantly accepted. Instead, they became convenient *mantras* to be invoked when contextually and politically convenient but not as a matter of making them a core aspect of education or national ethos. Even Krishnamurti’s ideas (not very different from Tagore’s when it comes to humanistic education) would have lapsed into not so often recalled memory by now if not for the fact that the schools he established survive in the hands of committed followers and have become much sought after educational institutions – beyond the direct control of the state.

Let me digress here. Why could I not live by the principles of Tagore as noted above? In 2014, while speaking at the University of Colombo on the theme, ‘Social Responsibility within Universities in Unstable Times: Doubts, Anxieties, Fears and Issues of Self-Preservation,’⁶ I also invoked Tagore in much the same way Karunanayake had done in the J.E. Jayasuriya Memorial Lecture, referring to the same three core approaches he had focused on. In concluding my thoughts, I noted, “in the words of Rabindranath Tagore, ‘I try to assert in my words and works that education has its only meaning and object in freedom – freedom from ignorance about the laws of the universe, and freedom from passion and prejudice in our communications with the human world.’”⁷ Personally, when I cannot do this, it is time for me to look for another vocation. When I cannot do this, I know I will not be able to carry out my responsibility to society. On the other hand, what you do is up to you, and when the future arrives, the writing on the wall will tell our younger

6 Guest lecture delivered at the international conference, ‘Revisiting Social Responsibility in Contexts of Crisis: Challenges and Possibilities in Sri Lanka’ at Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, 17 November 2014.

7 Tagore, Rabindranath. 2004. *Selected Essays*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, pp. 329.

generations how you dealt with your sense of social responsibility and what you did with your conscience.”⁸

However, it was not in Sri Lanka but in Tagore’s land of birth, India where I decided I could no longer be responsible to myself or to society within the institutional structure of the university I served at the time, the South Asian University. It had become an institution of thought control and outright mediocrity and not a space that encouraged thinking or independence of thought. And my own responsibilities could not be carried out because my colleagues, while flippantly quoting the same words attributed to Tagore and other likeminded thinkers, were acting completely contrary to their meaning.⁹ In that hostile environment no reflective academic endeavor was possible. A responsible and humanistic world cannot be created merely by words used out of context and without recourse to practitioners who would abide by these words. Tagore’s ideas, in this context were stylish to quote in the conference circuits but not safe to practice in quotidian academic life in the university or in life in general. On the other hand, what these ideas meant were never fully thought through by citizens or demanded to be made part of the educational approach in India in Tagore’s time or the present, and certainly not in our country. Collectively, it is this state of affairs I referred to as a **civilizational burden**.

In today’s world, including in our own country, the emphasis on humanism that Tagore had promoted and Karunanayake had explained well, is a burden in much the same way ethics is in public and private life.¹⁰ That is, we prefer to ignore such ideal notions in preference to convenience and political expediency. It is also in this context that social sciences and humanities are constantly downgraded by governments across the world as they are considered unrelated to market and labor needs. It is also popularly assumed that issues like humanism and ethics – if at all – should be part of these disciplines and not the sciences and professional and technical courses from legal to medical studies. But it is a serious mistake to

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9 See the following essays for information of the incidents in South Asian University in 2024: ‘Noam Chomsky’s criticism of PM in a PhD proposal: SAU notice to student, Lankan scholar resigns’ (Indian Express): <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/chomskys-criticism-of-pm-in-a-phd-proposal-sau-notice-to-student-lankan-scholar-resigns-9478146/> / ‘Deafening silence and choreographed timidity in SAU, says Sri Lankan scholar forced to quit over Chomsky’s criticism of NDA govt’ (Indian Express): <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/sau-sri-lankan-scholar-sasanka-perera-forced-to-quit-9550920/>

10 For more information on my thoughts on the disruption of ethics, read, ‘Navigating the Winds of Change: Leadership, Ethics and Non-compromise’; *Daily Financial Times*, Friday, 14 March 2025: <https://www.ft.lk/columns/Navigating-the-winds-of-change-Leadership-ethics-and-non-compromise/4-774235>

assume – as many people do – that humanistic education is merely for social sciences and humanities. It should be for all humans who go through systems of formal schooling. But as long as what Tagore stood for, which existed even before his time in South Asian civilizations in different forms as ideas, is seen merely as ‘soft’ skills not immediately useful for employment, they will not become part of our thinking, reflection or curriculum-making.

In my mind, this is where we stand. This is our **civilizational burden**. It is not that our time does not generate laudable ideas or allow some of us to visit the past and bring pragmatic ideas from there to the present as Karunanayake has done. It is not that our time does not encourage a handful of individuals to engage in these efforts. The burden of our civilization is not giving these ideas and principles such as those incorporated within humanistic education the popular recognition and political power they deserve to make them the guiding principles for our time as we take stock of the present and venture into the future.