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## Using a Poet's Archive to Write the History of a University: Rabindranath Tagore and Visva-Bharati

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### Abstract

The poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was the founder of an institution that we know today as Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan in rural southern Bengal. The making of this institution was central to his concerns to the end of his life. He offered it as an alternative to the colonial system of education then prevailing in India. Starting it as an experimental school in 1901 he added an international university and an institute of rural reconstruction in 1921–1922. It was an education to bring city and village together by combining traditional knowledge with scientific experimentation. This endeavour is a relatively unexplored dimension of Tagore's biography. In this presentation I shall examine how the making of this institution was a source of dialectical tension in Tagore's life, and how he engaged with this tension in thought and action.

**Keywords:** Santiniketan, Sriniketan, Visva-Bharati, education, national, international

The poet Rabindranath Tagore was the founder of an institution that we know today as Visva-Bharati University in the twin campuses of Santiniketan and Sriniketan in rural southern Bengal about a hundred miles north west of Calcutta. Starting it as an experimental school in 1901 he added an international university and an institute of rural reconstruction in 1921 and 1922. The making of this institution was central to his national and international concerns throughout his life. It was an education which sought to work for a common humanity, locally and globally, an institution unhindered by the territorially bounded model of the nation-state – India's entry into the universal, as it were.

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But this endeavour is a relatively unexplored dimension of Tagore's biography. He is feted as a literary genius, which he certainly was, but not seriously remembered as an educationist and rural reformer. By his own admission, the work he did for education and rural reconstruction was vital to him even if it meant living with a dialectical tension or a tension of opposites in his life. But the sad fact is that while Tagore continues to be celebrated, and rightly so, his cosmopolitan educational project in the Santiniketan and Sriniketan schools and Visva-Bharati 'one-nest-world' university has been marginalized by the imperatives of a competitive capitalism and nationalism.

He took up the work when he was about forty years of age, till which time he had only been following his literary pursuits.<sup>1</sup> He believed he had no gift for practical work and acknowledged he was no leader of men nor was he a moral preceptor. Why then did he do it? Even to himself, he was first and foremost a poet – and to his nationalist contemporaries, except for Gandhi and Nehru, his educational work and his idea of an inclusive nationalism were only a 'poet's fancy'. (Ohdedar 1986: 10, 27–28, 52, 54, 59; also see Chakrabarty 2000: 156–157)

I would like to submit that Tagore thought and worked on three focused goals in experimenting with his ideas of education and nationalism. Firstly, education rests where there is a natural field for the growth of scholarly learning; the purpose of a university is to produce scholarship and to spread it; to do this it was necessary to invite intellectuals and scholars who were devoted to research and discovery and creativity in their fields. A meeting-place of those minds was conceived to be the right venue for a true university. He believed with certainty it would not work to imitate a foreign university. Secondly, in every nation education is intimately associated with the life of the people; but for us in modern India, the colonial education was applied only to turning out clerks, lawyers, doctors, magistrates, munsiffs and policemen, which were the few favourite professions of the gentle folk. This education did not reach the majority of Indians like the farmer, the oil-grinder, the potter, because our new universities had not been a growth from the soil; they were like "parasites feeding on foreign oaks," he wrote.<sup>2</sup> Tagore argued that a truly Indian school must from the very beginning implement its acquired knowledge of economics, of agriculture, of health and all other everyday sciences in the surrounding villages; then alone can that school become the centre of the country's way of living. This was the *viswakarma* approach of his Visva-Bharati institutions at Santiniketan and Sriniketan, or the

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<sup>1</sup> Standard biographies all tell this story: Kripalani 1980; Dutta and Robinson 1995; Das Gupta 2004; Das Gupta 2006. Also see: Mukherjee 1962; O'Connell 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Tagore (1913) to Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty, 30 January 1913. Translated by Uma Das Gupta. Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty (1886–1918), early teacher of the Santiniketan school, 1904–1918.

approach of total activity. Thirdly, Tagore held that the Indian National Congress followed a faulty policy of petitions and pleas for favours from the colonial government, which he critiqued as the ‘politics of begging’; he recommended instead the need to plunge into constructive work by taking responsibility for one’s own state and society both as individuals and as collectives so that change could happen.<sup>3</sup>

Tagore was convinced that all these goals could be approached through a new and alternative education to address three main issues: societal, pedagogic, and the need to connect with the gateways of learning, nationally and internationally. Even with being a critic of imperialism and the West’s display of greed and violence, his critique represented just one aspect of a balanced appraisal of Western civilization in which he found much to admire. His evaluation of the East included the denunciation of the hierarchical and static elements of its culture. Therefore, he was concerned not just with the cultural domination that grew out of colonial hegemony but equally with the cultural domination that had evolved from his country’s own past and was gathering momentum as a divisive force between city and village in early modern India due to the spread of colonial education and the rise of a somewhat dehumanised professional class.

We move now, very briefly, to the historical facts about Santiniketan. It was discovered as a serene place in the early 1860s by Tagore’s father who bought a spot of land there and built a guest house on it in 1863 which he named Santiniketan, meaning an abode of peace. It was there that Tagore set up his school in 1901 at a time of great nationalist fervour in Bengal, acknowledged by historians as Bengal’s call for ‘constructive *swadesi*’. (Sarkar 1973) Tagore took to constructive *swadesi* at his Santiniketan school. He wrote, “The growth of the Santiniketan school was the growth of my life” and continued to experiment with his ideas for a new education in which city and the village, nation and world, the local and the global, would become partners in learning from each other’s life-experience. (Tagore 1951: 6–7)

Tagore’s Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and his world travels while Europe was experiencing the carnage of the first World War of 1914–1918 led him to plan a wider educational venture for a civilizational meeting of the ‘races’. He believed that conflicts and aggressive nationalism could be diffused by the study of each other’s histories and cultures and the exchange of higher learning. This venture materialised into Visva-Bharati, his international university in 1921, with a logo taken from the Vedas, *yatra visvam eka nidam*, meaning, ‘where the whole world meets in one nest’. Visva-Bharati was kept away from the nationalist Non-cooperation movement, also

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<sup>3</sup> Tagore (1967: 30–33) to Dinesh Chandra Sen, 17 November 1905, in Bengal. Translation mine. Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866–1939), historian and contemporary of Tagore. Also see Tagore 1997: 58.

launched in 1920–1921 under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership without losing friendship. A final experiment came in 1922 with the establishment of a school of scientific agriculture and an institute of rural reconstruction named Sriniketan, meaning an abode of wellbeing, that was located in the villages surrounding the Santiniketan school. (Das Gupta 2004)

With these basic facts in the background, I would like to move to an enumeration of some of Tagore's key statements in explaining why he started a school in the lap of nature where children could assimilate what they were taught with joy and creativity. (Tagore 2002: 141)



**Photo 1:** Early Santiniketan Landscape



**Photo 2:** The Santiniketan House

He wrote: “What weighed on my mind was the unnatural pressure of the system of education which prevailed everywhere.” (Tagore 1999: 67)

He wrote: “We may become powerful by knowledge but we attain fullness by sympathy. The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.” (Das Gupta 2009: 88)

He wanted two changes, firstly, to bring about at least an awareness of traditional knowledge among the English-educated urban Indian milieu, and, simultaneously, to bring the fruits of science of technology to the common populace and not just to the English educated milieu. (Tagore 1973: 299–300)<sup>4</sup>

There was great stress laid on locality and atmosphere and a simple life (Tagore 1941b: 333–334).<sup>5</sup>

He described the Santiniketan school as an indigenous attempt to adapt modern methods of education in a truly Indian cultural environment.<sup>6</sup>

Since his award of the Nobel Prize in 1913, Tagore became a world traveller. His successive tours in the aftermath of the First World War convinced him of the necessity of a wider educational venture. Europe was in turmoil, its old ideals shaken. The enthusiasm with which his messages of international cooperation were received convinced him of the need for an international centre. And where else could that be but in Santiniketan?



**Photo 3:** Audience at a lecture Tagore gave in Carnegie Hall, New York, 1921

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<sup>4</sup> Translated by Uma Das Gupta.

<sup>5</sup> Translated by Uma Das Gupta.

<sup>6</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, subtitle in pamphlet *Visva-Bharati*, Santiniketan, 1929.

Doors were opened to men and women to collaborate in intellectual companionship and creative activity without opposing interests and without national boundaries. In 1921, Visva-Bharati was officially instituted as an international university in Santiniketan.

Visva-Bharati's keynote ideal was cooperation and that is why Tagore stayed away from Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation movement. "Is it not an irony of fate", Tagore wrote, "that I should call for cooperation when my country has given the call for non-cooperation?"<sup>7</sup>

Gandhi understood Tagore and they remained friends for ever.<sup>8</sup> Tagore wrote, "Where truth is concerned there can be no East nor West" (Tagore 1963: 31).<sup>9</sup> Tagore, Gandhi, C.F.Andrews all felt alike about Visva-Bharati.

The final experiments in Visva-Bharati's education for an inclusive humanism through total activity came with the establishment of the rural reconstruction programme in Sriniketan in 1922, as a twin institution of the Santiniketan school.

Visva-Bharati as an international centre of learning and Sriniketan as a practical experiment in rural reconstruction flourished in the 1920s and 30s with activists from the world joining hands with the teachers and the villagers. (Das Gupta 2008: 992–993)

The two essential features of Tagore's endeavour as educationist was Visva-Bharati's ideal of a total approach to education by combining the local and the global cultures and along with that its ideal of total activity, *viswakarma*. (Tagore 1962: 98–103)<sup>10</sup>

But there were not many takers for his ideas in his country. He wrote: "It is difficult to come completely out of the net in which the system of education has enmeshed our country" (Tagore 1992: 133).<sup>11</sup> But Tagore did not give up.

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<sup>7</sup> Tagore (1929: 132) to C. F. Andrews, 5 March 1921. Charles Freer Andrews (1871–1940), Anglican missionary, friend of both Tagore and Gandhi, lived and served in Santiniketan from 1913 to the end of his life.

<sup>8</sup> See letters and exchanges between Rabindranath Tagore and M. K. Gandhi in Bhattacharya 1997. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), or Mahatma Gandhi, apostle of Non-violence, who led India's freedom struggle, is widely regarded as the father of the nation.

<sup>9</sup> Translated by Uma Das Gupta.

<sup>10</sup> In English translation, "The History and Ideals of Sriniketan" (Tagore 1941a) translated by Marjorie Sykes.

<sup>11</sup> Translated by Uma Das Gupta.

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