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Rabindranath Tagore's Educational Philosophy and Its Relevance in Modern Pedagogy

Sampa Biswas Debnath

Research Scholar, Department of Education, University of Kalyani, Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal, India

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Corresponding Author: Sampa Biswas Debnath

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore, one of India's greatest thinkers, poets, and educators, developed a vision of education that went far beyond the rigid and memorization-based methods of his time. This article examines Tagore's educational philosophy, which brings together the ideas of naturalism, humanism, idealism, and internationalism in a balanced and meaningful way. Deeply dissatisfied with the colonial education system introduced by the British, Tagore advocated an approach to learning that emphasized freedom, creativity, and a close relationship with nature. His ideas took practical shape in Santiniketan and later in Visva-Bharati University, where he sought to create a model of education that combined the best of Indian cultural traditions with the progressive elements of Western thought. By exploring key aspects of his philosophy, such as education in the mother tongue, learning through activity, and the pursuit of spiritual growth, this paper highlights the continuing importance of Tagore's educational ideas in today's world.

Keywords: Educational Philosophy, Naturalism, Humanism, Idealism, Internationalism, Santiniketan, Mother Tongue Education, Holistic Learning

Introduction

In early 20th-century India, education was largely shaped by the colonial system, which aimed more at producing obedient clerks and administrative workers than developing thoughtful and well-rounded human beings. Rabindranath Tagore strongly criticized this model because he believed it made learning dry, rigid, and lifeless, leaving little room for a child's curiosity, creativity, and happiness. As an alternative, he imagined education as something deeply connected with life itself. For Tagore, real education was not just about memorizing lessons, but about helping individuals grow freely, think independently, and rise above narrow social and intellectual boundaries [2, 3, 7, 8, 6].

Rabindranath Tagore's educational philosophy grew out of his own life experiences and personal reflections. His dissatisfaction with formal schooling, his deep connection with nature, and his broad humanistic outlook strongly shaped his ideas about education. For Tagore, education was never just about memorizing scattered facts. He saw it as a

meaningful process that should help bring out the best within each child. In opposing the rigid, mechanical, and colonial model of schooling, he developed a child-centered vision of education that gave importance to freedom, creativity, emotional growth, spiritual development, and intellectual awakening [3, 8, 9, 5].

Philosophical Foundations of Tagore's Pedagogy

Tagore's educational thought represents an integrated philosophical framework grounded in four major principles: naturalism, humanism, idealism, and internationalism. These interrelated foundations shaped the aims, content, and method of his educational vision, with the broader purpose of fostering the harmonious and balanced development of the individual personality [10, 1].

Naturalism and the Lap of Nature

At the heart of Tagore's educational philosophy lies the conviction that nature is the most powerful teacher and the

most suitable setting for learning. He believed that when children are distanced from the natural world, they are denied vital sensory experiences and intellectual stimulation necessary for their holistic growth. In Tagore's view, education conducted in close contact with nature, away from the artificial surroundings of urban life, created favourable conditions for spontaneous learning and the development of creativity. He further held that the natural environment awakened children's curiosity and sense of wonder, thereby transforming learning into a joyful and meaningful process rather than a burdensome routine [8, 6, 2].

Humanism and Spiritual Idealism

Tagore closely linked humanism with spiritualism and held that the highest aim of human life, and therefore of education, is self-realization. In his view, education should awaken the human spirit, nurture a sense of universal brotherhood, and strengthen moral character. He did not regard education as a mere means of achieving material success; rather, he envisioned it as a process that fosters the spiritual dimension of the learner's personality. For Tagore, true education required a harmonious balance between intellectual development, emotional sensitivity, and human empathy [7, 6, 1].

Internationalism and Cosmopolitanism

At a time when aggressive nationalism was shaping political and intellectual life, Tagore articulated a broader and more humane vision grounded in cosmopolitanism. He argued that education should move beyond narrow geographical and cultural limits and create opportunities for meaningful intercultural understanding. In his view, a sound educational system needed to draw thoughtfully from both Eastern philosophical traditions and Western scientific knowledge. Such an approach, he believed, would help develop students as responsible, sensitive, and ethically aware citizens of an interdependent world. At the same time, this outlook challenged colonial hierarchies by affirming mutual respect, cultural dialogue, and a shared human inheritance [5, 3].

Core Aims of Education

Tagore articulated education as a process with multiple, interrelated aims, moving beyond narrow and superficial curricula toward the holistic development of the learner [4, 3].

Intellectual and Creative Development

For Tagore, intellectual development did not mean the mere accumulation of information through rote memorization. Rather, he understood it as the growth of inventiveness, curiosity, independent thinking, and alertness of mind. In his view, one of the central aims of education was to nurture the capacities for critical reflection and imagination. Such development, he argued, could take place only when learners were given the freedom to ask questions, participate in discussion, and pursue inquiry without being constrained by rigid academic dogma [6, 1, 10, 3].

Self-Realization and Personality Cultivation

Tagore regarded education as a means of self-realization, through which the individual comes to understand and develop the full range of human potential. In his view, education should foster the balanced growth of the learner

by attending to physical, intellectual, and social dimensions of life. He emphasized that opportunities for self-expression through literature, the arts, and physical activity are essential, as they help students uncover their natural abilities and cultivate an integrated, well-rounded personality [1, 2, 4].

Harmony with the Environment and Society

Another important aim of education, in Tagore's view, is to help students learn to live in meaningful relationship with their environment, cultural traditions, and the wider human community. He believed that genuine education should free the mind from narrowness and division, while nurturing cooperation, mutual respect, and a deep sense of spiritual connectedness among people from different social and cultural backgrounds [3, 7, 8].

Pedagogical Methods and Innovations

To translate his philosophical ideals into educational practice, Tagore adopted a number of innovative pedagogical methods that clearly differed from the rigid and conventional approaches of his time [3].

Instruction in the Mother Tongue

Tagore strongly supported the use of the mother tongue as the chief medium of instruction. In his view, education delivered through a foreign language often places an unnecessary distance between the learner and the subject, thereby limiting real understanding and natural intellectual development. He believed that when children learn in their native language, they are able to grasp ideas more meaningfully and communicate their thoughts with greater ease, clarity, and self-confidence [2].

Activity-Based and Heuristic Learning

Rather than relying on passive lectures, Tagore advocated an experiential and activity-based approach to education. He emphasized the heuristic method, through which students were encouraged to acquire knowledge independently by means of exploration, discussion, debate, and direct engagement with their surroundings. Such flexibility in pedagogy reflected his belief that education should respond to the evolving needs, interests, and natural pace of the learner [3].

Freedom and Self-Expression

A central feature of Tagore's educational method was his emphasis on freedom in learning rather than rigid or oppressive discipline. He believed that children should be given sufficient space to develop their creative abilities through activities such as music, drama, art, and meaningful engagement with nature. For Tagore, such freedom did not imply disorder or lack of guidance; rather, it was a means of nurturing self-discipline, inner growth, and intrinsic motivation in the learner [6, 2].

Institutional Manifestation: Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati

Tagore's educational ideas were not confined to theory; they were translated into practice through the institutions he established, most notably Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati University [8, 1]. Santiniketan, founded first as an experimental school, reflected his belief that education

should take place in close contact with the natural world. Teaching was conducted in the open air, often under trees and within a calm natural setting, rather than inside enclosed classrooms. This arrangement was intended to create a more joyful and organic learning environment and to keep students closely connected with the rhythms and beauty of nature [8].

Visva-Bharati, which later developed into an international university, gave institutional form to Tagore's broader vision of cultural exchange and intellectual unity. It was conceived as a place where learning would move beyond the limitations of colonial education and foster dialogue among different civilizations. In this setting, art, science, culture, and the environment were brought into meaningful relationship with one another. By welcoming scholars and students from different parts of the world, Visva-Bharati came to represent Tagore's commitment to international understanding, human unity, and a democratic spirit in education [5, 6].

Contemporary Relevance of Tagore's Pedagogy

More than a century after they were first articulated, Tagore's educational ideas continue to retain remarkable relevance. Many contemporary progressive education systems now place increasing emphasis on child-centered learning, environmental sensitivity, and the holistic development of the learner principles that Tagore had envisioned much earlier [5, 6].

In the present context of globalization and growing environmental concerns, Tagore's emphasis on harmony with nature, intercultural understanding, and the integration of different forms of knowledge appears especially significant. His educational thought offers an important framework for addressing present-day challenges, as it promotes the cultivation of moral values, emotional strength, and a sense of responsibility toward the wider human community [6, 5].

Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore's educational philosophy marked a significant departure from the narrow and utilitarian models of education prevalent in his time. He proposed a broader and more humane vision of learning that connected education with life, nature, culture, and the full development of the individual. By bringing together naturalism and humanism, as well as a deep respect for local cultural traditions with an openness to universal values, Tagore articulated an educational approach that aimed at the liberation of the human mind. The ideals embodied in Visva-Bharati remain an important part of his educational legacy and continue to influence contemporary discussions on educational reform. In this sense, Tagore viewed education not simply as preparation for future life, but as a meaningful and holistic process of living, through which individuals become intellectually independent, emotionally balanced, and socially compassionate [7, 1, 2, 5, 6, 3].

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