

PEOPLE AND IDEAS



Azim Premji
University



TAGORE ~ A LIFE OF LEARNING

AN AZIM PREMJI UNIVERSITY PUBLICATION



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Text:

Selections from Tagore's own writings (original and translations)

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Tagore - A Life of Learning

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"In our childhood, we would read every available book from one end to the other. Both what we understood and what we did not, went on working within us."

- Rabindranath Tagore



On The Seashore

"On the seashore of endless worlds children meet.

The infinite sky is motionless overhead
and the restless water is boisterous.

On the seashore of endless worlds
the children meet with shouts and dances.

They build their houses with sand
and they play with empty shells.

With withered leaves they weave their boats
and smilingly float them on the vast deep.

Children have their play on the seashore of worlds."

- Rabindranath Tagore

Foreword

The 'People and Ideas' initiative of Azim Premji University, is an attempt to explore the ideas, lives and works of the many social reformers, artists, scientists, philosophers and educationists who have influenced us deeply. During this process we hope to develop a platform to understand, engage with and discuss the ideas that have fundamentally shaped our vision and philosophy.

We begin this series with a graphic novel on Rabindranath Tagore's ideas and philosophy of education. Tagore expresses in all his writings, that he experienced no joy while being taught by a series of teachers, or shifting from one conventional school to another. His approach to teaching grew from his life experiences. The school he set up in Santiniketan was 'conceived to free the students' minds and lead them to a state of creative unity where they would respect human beings, irrespective of caste or creed'.

Tagore tried to inculcate the joy of learning among his students by integrating the classroom with nature. The myriad celebrations at Visva Bharati were envisaged to educate his students about the natural and human world around them, about collective action and community involvement. The dream was to foster complete human development where the unique potential of each child could flower in a happy and secure environment.

We at Azim Premji University have endeavoured to bring out the enduring vision of this extraordinary human being and educationist by providing glimpses of his childhood, his ideas and his beliefs (mostly in his own words).

The text of this graphic novel consists primarily of selections from Tagore's own autobiographical writings, both original and translations. Uma Das Gupta's work on Tagore - "My Life In My Words" has been the primary reference and source of much of the material that appears here.

The illustrations in the book have been done by a young student of art and the images have been sourced from the Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Visva Bharati, Santiniketan. For me personally, this has been an inspiring journey of discovery into the mind of a sensitive and empathetic visionary.

Tagore is an educator for all times and his ideas are as relevant today, as they were when he lived. The lives and thoughts of such luminaries can influence attitudes, encourage reflection and catalyze change in the minds of our teachers, our students and the societies that we are a part of. We hope that the "People and Ideas" initiative will play its own small part in keeping alive this precious legacy.

Jayshree Nair-Misra

Azim Premji University, Bangalore

Currents of Movements...

In the decade of 1860s, Bengal was caught in the currents of several parallel movements. Raja Ram Mohan Roy had begun to question orthodox religious ideas and reopen the channels of spiritual life which had been obstructed for many years by formal and materialistic creeds. In this, he had the firm support of my father, Debendranath Tagore.

It was a time of literary renaissance. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was creating modern Bengali prose and ushering in the return of magic into Bengali literature.

It was a time of nationalistic resurgence - political murmurings, nationalistic sentiment, a feeling of oneness, a pride in all that was Indian - a nation was on the rise. The expression of the Indian people and an assertion of their own identity was beginning to flower.



Kolkata in the 1860s



As a Child

There was something remarkable about our family. All members were well versed in writing, art, music and theatre. We were politically aware and unconventional, a household flourishing at the confluence of different cultures. Into this liberal, humanist family, I was born on 7th May, 1861 at Jorasanko, Calcutta.

There was little or no conventional custom and ritual in our home. As a boy I learnt to recite slokas from the Upanishads with a clear enunciation. Spirituality was at the core of our family but with no excesses in ritual and conventional practices. My father's spiritual life was quiet and controlled.

Our family's idealist seclusion gave us the freedom to speak, to think and to be creative. I grew up in an environment where nurturing Bengali literature, music and art, while simultaneously appreciating foreign languages, customs and lifestyle was the norm.

Jorasanko, our family home was a rich confluence of Hindu, Muslim, and Western cultures.

The annual Hindu Mela was wholly patronised by my family to bring a reverential realization of India, as our motherland. Our motherland was glorified every year through poetry, song, dance, indigenous art and craft.



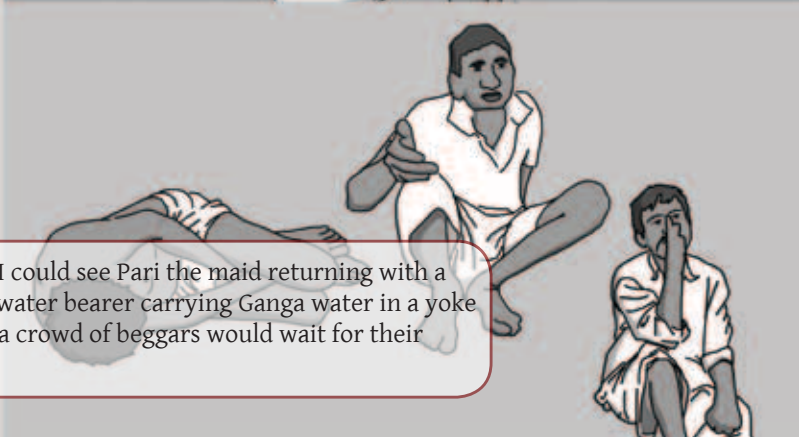
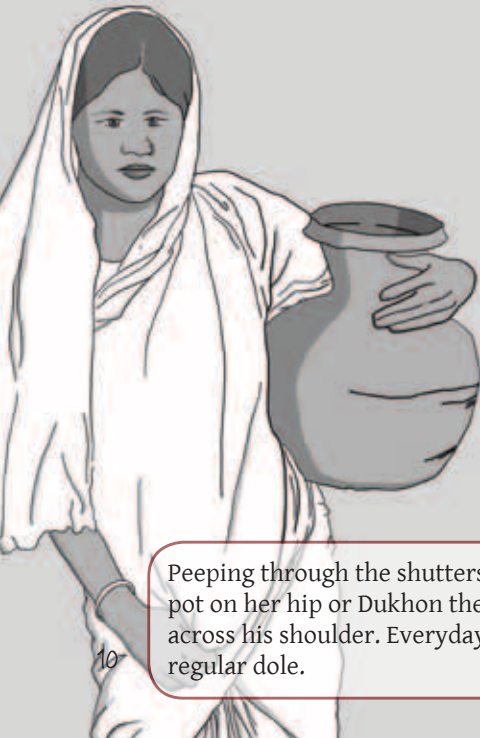
Bankim Chandra Chatterjee created the modern Bengali prose and brought back the magic to Bengali writing. My family supported this strongly, as a means to create love for our indigenous works.

My father firmly supported Raja Ram Mohun Roy's moving away from orthodox religious ideas.



My childhood was not regulated by any ancient laws. My young creativity was not subjected to the accusing fingers of ancient norms.

In my mind, the world has always been full of wonder, full of the inexpressible. My instinctive response to this world was an intimate part of my childhood.

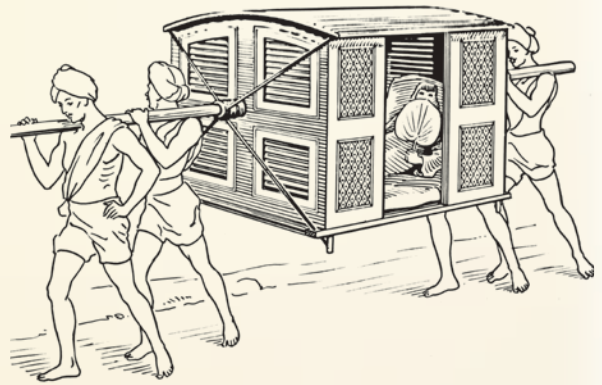


Peeping through the shutters I could see Pari the maid returning with a pot on her hip or Dukhon the water bearer carrying Ganga water in a yoke across his shoulder. Everyday a crowd of beggars would wait for their regular dole.

My brothers were much older. When I was born, Dwijendranath was already 21, Satyendranath 19, Hemendranath 17 and Jyotirindranath 13. My four elder brothers had a strong influence on me. Typically of a large and traditional Indian family - I hardly saw my mother and father. A retinue of servants raised me and my cousins. Some parts of the house were forbidden to us children and I would amuse myself by peeping through shutters at the limitless thing called the 'Outside' - the sights, sounds and scents of which attracted me strongly.

My childhood days unfolded at a leisurely pace. When I was about 7-8 years old, I would often hide in an unused, long forgotten palanquin at the corner of the counting house, completely lost to view, delightfully safe from prying eyes.

I would then set out on my imaginary travels, passing through far, strange lands. Sometimes my palanquin became a peacock-boat floating on the ocean until the shore was out of sight.





A celebrated one-eyed wrestler taught me wrestling in the early hours of wintery dawns!



The monotony of my school-days was broken sometimes by watching -

- kites in the sky



- a man with a dancing bear

Boyhood Days



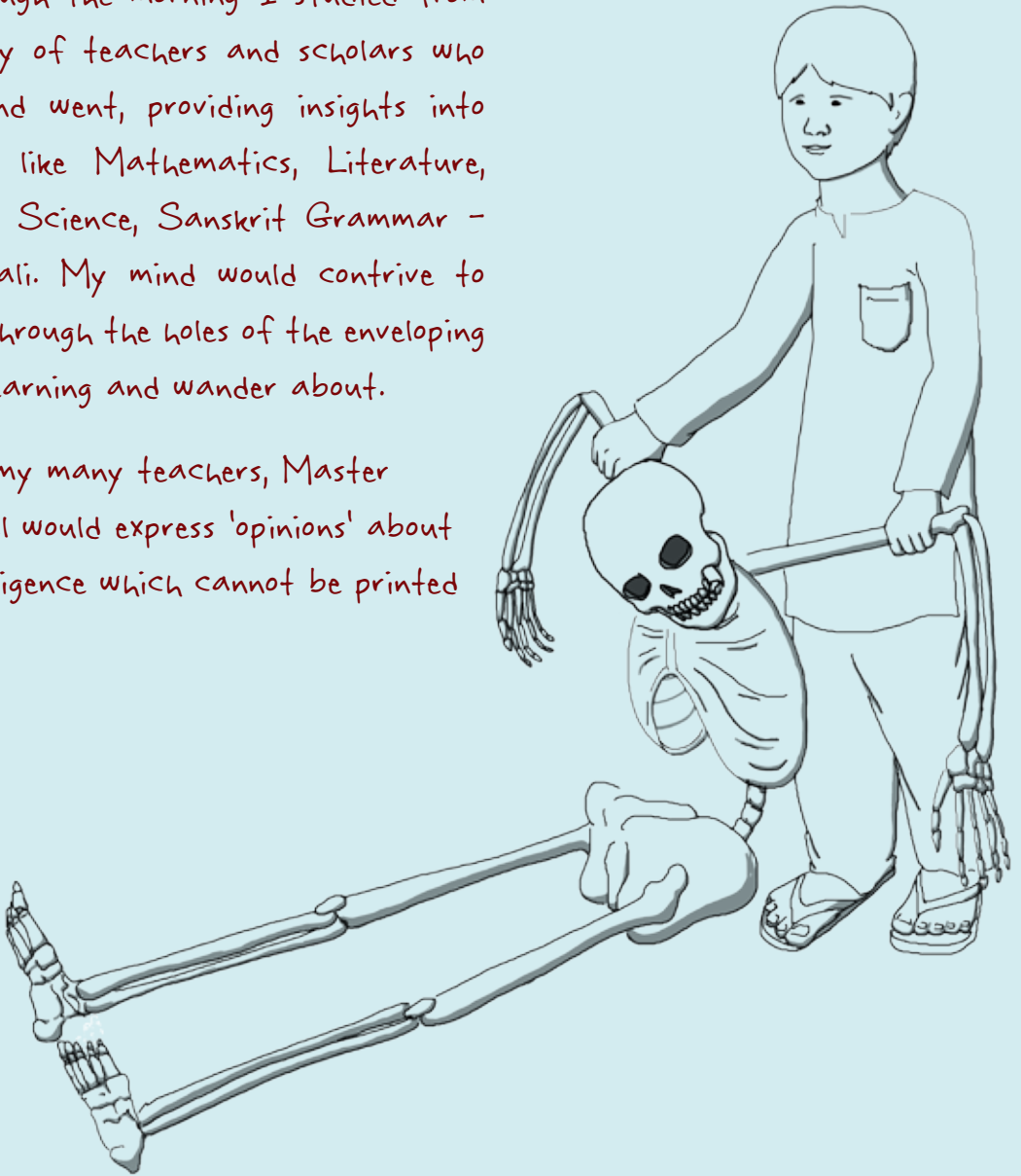
- boys playing bat and ball or spinning their tops

There were days when I assumed the role of a teacher with imaginary pupils. Some of them were very naughty and cared nothing about their books. I made dire threats but could never stop them from being naughty as truthfully, it would have been the end of my game!

I also loved to spend time at the deserted 'golabari' or barn where the yearly harvest of grains was stored earlier. Perhaps, it being a deserted and unused land situated in the far north of the house, was its charm for me. The 'golabari' gave free rein to my boyish imagination.

All through the morning I studied from a variety of teachers and scholars who came and went, providing insights into subjects like Mathematics, Literature, Natural Science, Sanskrit Grammar - in Bengali. My mind would contrive to escape through the holes of the enveloping net of learning and wander about.

One of my many teachers, Master Nilkamal would express 'opinions' about my intelligence which cannot be printed here!



A student from the Medical College would teach me the lores of bones with the help of a skeleton! The bones swayed and rattled but the fear I felt was overcome by constantly handling them, and learning their long, difficult names.

My early learning was in the servants' quarters listening to the Ramayan, and through my grandmother's stories in the evening...

Reading and listening to poetry and stories awakened me to the realm of truth, the harmony of existence. It led me from obscurity to a sense of wonder about everything around me.



My evenings were spent in learning gymnastics and drawing, followed by English. My eyelids would begin to droop until I was finally allowed to tumble into my bed. I would fall asleep listening to stories about a king's son who travelled over an endless, trackless plain.

Travels with Father

Interactions with my father were few and far between as he often travelled on his work. But I always felt his presence, because he was always meticulous about details and the arrangements at home, even when he was travelling.

Following my sacred thread ceremony, my father invited me to accompany him on a long trip to the Himalayas - but only after first asking me whether I would like to go or not. I realize now, that my father respected the viewpoint and choice of an eleven year old boy.

In retrospect, this journey turned out to be the keystone in my learning, the turning point of my young life, the window into my future world, bringing with it the freedom to explore and experience with all my young senses.



When father was home from his travels, I would watch him from my hiding place at the head of the staircase. The sun had not yet risen and he sat on the roof, silent as an image of white stone, his hands folded in his lap.





From the train, I saw field after field, bounded by blue-green trees and villages nestling in their shade, flying past in a stream of pictures.

Our first halt was at Bolpur...

My father did not place any restriction on my wanderings, though I was a child. I wandered among the hollows of the sandy soil, where the rain water had ploughed deep furrows, the whole scene looking like miniature mountain ranges full of red gravel and pebbles. I would collect these multihued stones, and would bring them to a receptive, loving father.

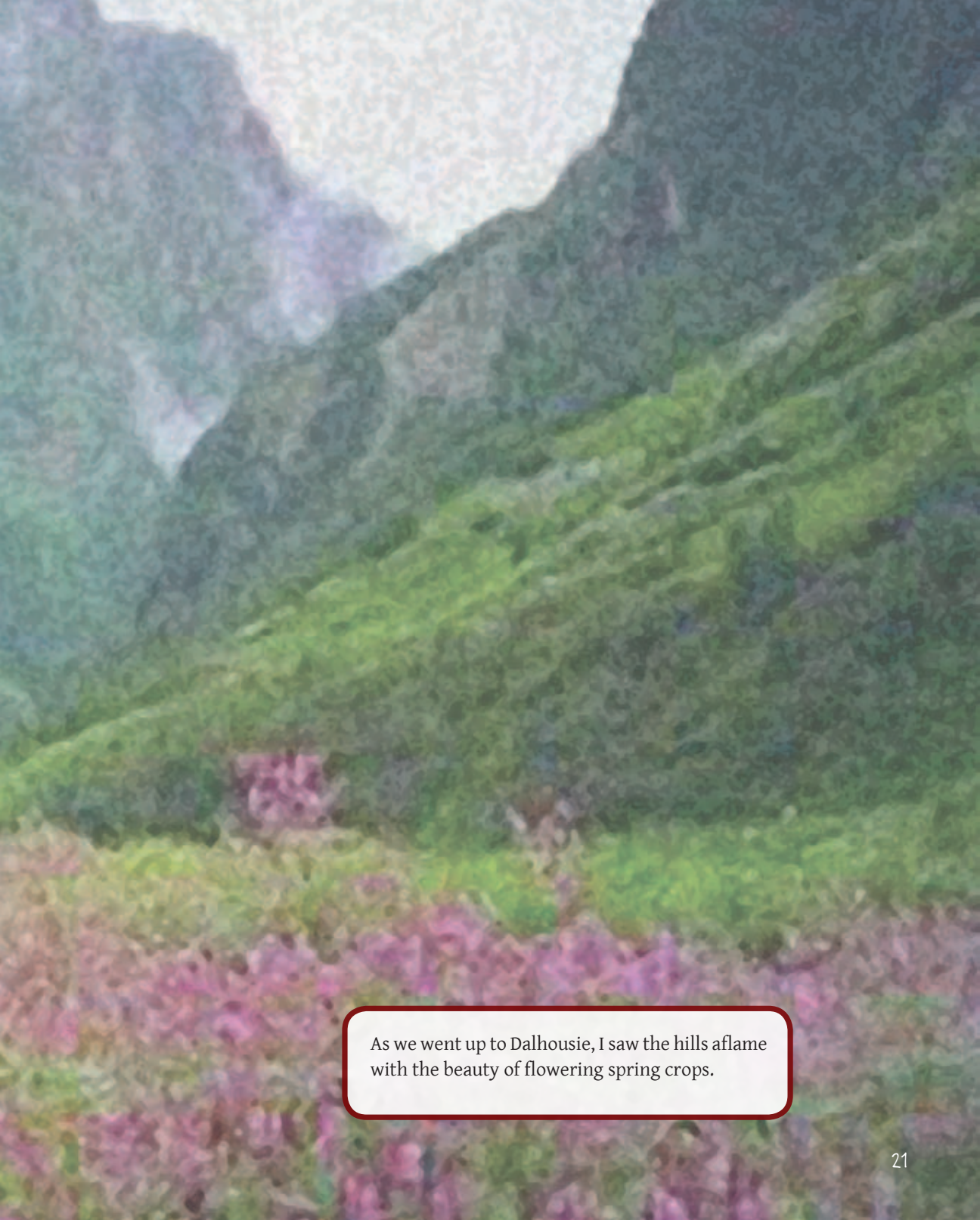
There are many, many more, thousands and thousands! I could bring as many every day.



That would be nice! Why not decorate my little hill with them?







As we went up to Dalhousie, I saw the hills aflame with the beauty of flowering spring crops.

The house we had taken at Bakrota was on the highest hilltop. Though it was nearing May, it was still bitterly cold, so much so that on the shadier part of the mountain, the winter frost had not melted yet. My room was at one end of the house. Lying on my bed, I could see through the un-curtained windows, the distant snowy peaks shimmering dimly in the starlight.



Before sunrise, my father would say his morning prayers. We would then go out for a walk. I could hardly keep pace with him... and after a while I would give up and scramble back. After morning lessons and our midday meal, I would wander away to explore the mountain side. As dusk would settle in, we would sit outside the bungalow. The stars blazed out in the clear mountain sky, and my father showed me the constellations or treated me to a discourse on astronomy!

My father never stood in the way of my independence. He believed that truth could be found only by believing and loving it from the heart. He allowed me to wander about the mountains at my will, leaving me free to select my own path in the quest for truth. Neither did the danger of my making mistakes deter him, nor was he alarmed at the prospect of my encountering sorrow. He held up a standard, not a disciplinary rod.

My Mother

I cannot remember my mother

only sometimes in the midst of my play
a tune seems to hover over my playthings,
the tune of some song that she used to
hum while rocking my cradle.

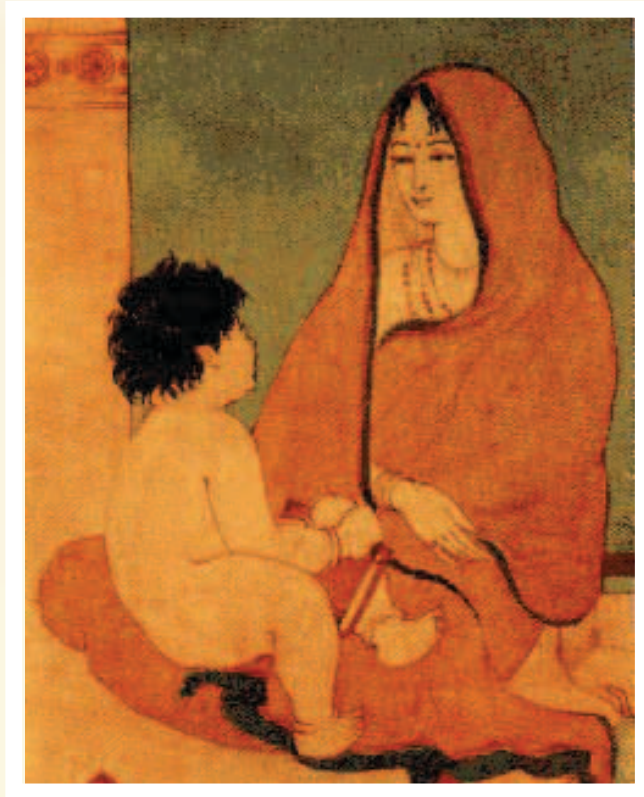


I cannot remember my mother

but when in the early autumn morning
the smell of the shiuli flowers floats in the air
the scent of the morning service in the temple
comes to me as the scent of my mother.

I cannot remember my mother

only when from my bedroom window I send
my eyes into the blue of the distant sky,
I feel that the stillness of
my mother's gaze on my face
has spread all over the sky.



When my mother died I was fourteen. She had been ailing for a long time, and we did not even know when her malady had taken a fatal turn.

On the night she died we were fast asleep in our room downstairs. Our old nurse came running in, weeping and crying. Half awakened by her words, I felt my heart sink within me, but could not make out what had happened. I did not realize all that it meant for me at that time.

My Poetry

Absconding from school, never taking a test, never passing one, I was not sure where I stood. My mind wandered everywhere. I discovered that verses and rhymes were made by ordinary men and women and with this joy of discovery, I began to write.

My early rhymes were the products of an immature mind and cavalier thoughts.

I owe my poetic development to my nephew Jyoti, who was older than me. He encouraged me to write and taught me the meaning of metre. And also to my elder brother Somendranath, whose pride in my performance impelled him to hunt about the house for an audience!

My father upon hearing one of my hymns about the trials and tribulations of this world, was hugely amused that the sorrows of the world should have so early moved his youngest son to the point of versification. The reward was a cheque for my pains!



Nabagopal Babu, who was the editor of the National Paper smiled at my 'childish showing off' in using an archaic word that was not easily understood !



Look here, Nabagopal Babu! Wont you listen to a poem which Rabi has written ?

Well done! But what is dwirepha?



Our school superintendent Govinda Babu , a short, fat and dark-skinned man, wanted to bring credit to the School and ordered me to write a poem. I recited my work before my classmates and heard the verdict - 'This verse is assuredly stolen goods'!



If the king of the country had known the language and could appreciate its literature, he would have rewarded the poet. Since that is not so, I suppose I must do it.

Saying this father handed me a cheque!

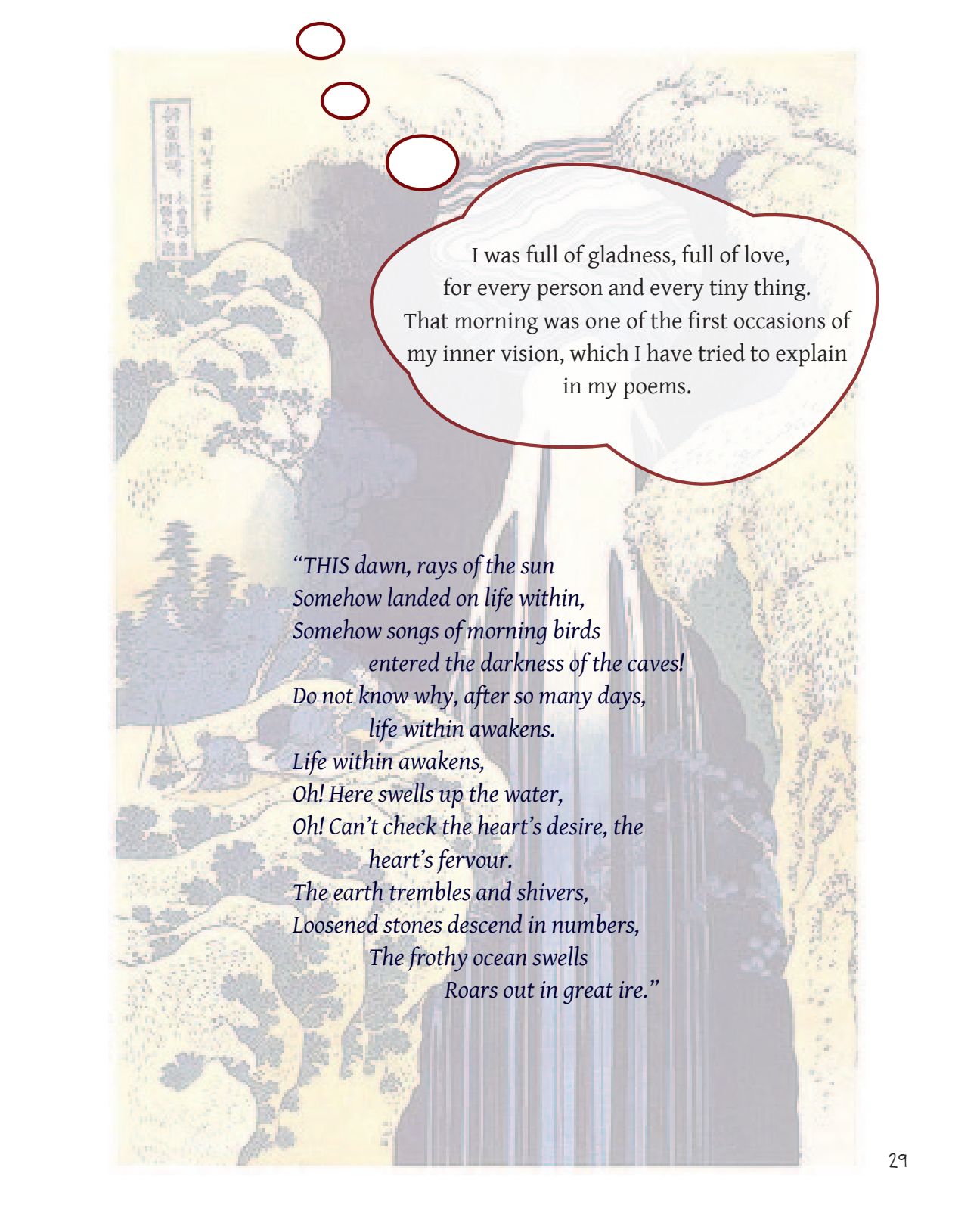


While in England between 1878 and 1880, I began writing a poem, which I continued during my journey home and finished after my return. It was called 'Bhagna Hriday' or Broken Heart.

I was eighteen - neither in my childhood nor in my youth. This borderland is not illumined with the direct rays of truth - its reflection is seen here and there, and the rest is shadow. And like the shades of twilight, its imaginings are long drawn and vague, making the real world seem phantasmal.

One morning, I was watching the sunrise from Free School Lane in Calcutta, it appeared to me as if a veil was suddenly withdrawn and everything became luminous. The whole scene was one of perfect music, one marvellous rhythm.

That very day the poem, 'Nirjaharer Swapnabhanga' or The Awakening of the Waterfall gushed forth and coursed on like a veritable cascade. I have felt, ever since, that this was my goal: to express the fullness of life, in its beauty, as perfection, if only the veil were withdrawn.



I was full of gladness, full of love,
for every person and every tiny thing.
That morning was one of the first occasions of
my inner vision, which I have tried to explain
in my poems.

*“THIS dawn, rays of the sun
Somehow landed on life within,
Somehow songs of morning birds
entered the darkness of the caves!
Do not know why, after so many days,
life within awakens.
Life within awakens,
Oh! Here swells up the water,
Oh! Can't check the heart's desire, the
heart's fervour.
The earth trembles and shivers,
Loosened stones descend in numbers,
The frothy ocean swells
Roars out in great ire.”*

My Encounter with Rural Bengal

When I was about 29, my father asked me to take charge of the zamindari of our estates that lay along the Padma River from Shelaidah to Patisar. I took my place in a neighbourhood where the current of time ran slow, where joys and sorrows had their simple and elemental shades and lights.

It was in Shelaidah that my nature developed, as I saw all aspects of village life. Slowly but surely, I began to understand the sorrow and poverty of the villagers and grew restless to do something about it. I began to think about what could be done. I did not think helping from outside would help. I began to try and open their minds towards self-reliance.

Speaking of those times I wrote to Abala Bose, wife of my dear friend Jagadish Chandra Bose, "I am preoccupied with the problems of the village society and shall work on rural reconstruction in our zamindari. A few boys have volunteered and are trying to inspire the villagers to organize their own education, sanitation and self governance. These boys have already initiated public works such as the repair of roads and paths, excavation of tanks, cutting drains and clearing jungles."



Religion of Man

Living in the villages of Shelaidah and Patisar, I made my first direct contact with rural life. On one hand was the external scene of rivers, meadows, rice fields, and mud huts sheltered under the trees. On the other was the inner story of the people. I came to understand their troubles in the course of my duties. My ignorance about estate matters - keeping accounts, collecting revenue, credit and debit - lay heavy on my mind.

As I entered into the work, it took hold of me. It is my nature that whenever I undertake any responsibility I lose myself in it and try to do my utmost. As I unravelled the complexities of zamindari work, I earned a reputation for instituting new methods. Neighbouring landlords began to send their men to me to learn my methods. In spite of doubts about the new way the records were kept, I persisted, changing things from top to bottom. The results proved to be satisfactory.

I have found my religion at last
- the Religion of Man
in which the infinite became defined in humanity
and came close to me so as to need
my love and cooperation.



I did all my work with enthusiasm and joy, as I had lived in seclusion since boyhood and this was my first experience of the village. I was satisfied and heartened and filled with the pleasure of blazing new trails.

To try and help the villagers could do no good. My problem was how to kindle a spark of life in them.

The habit of dependence has come down to us from time immemorial. In the olden days, one rich man used to be the mainstay of the village and its guide. Health, education and everything were his responsibility. I have praised that system, but it is also true that because of it the common man's capacity for self reliance was enfeebled.

In my estate, the river was far away and lack of water was a serious problem. I had also built the road from the office to Kushtia, and discovered that the thought of others enjoying the fruits of their labour was unbearable to the villagers. They would rather put up with the inconveniences of no water and bad roads.



If you dig a well, I shall get it cemented.

If we dig the well, you will go to heaven through the accumulated virtue of having provided water for the thirsty, while we would have done all the work.

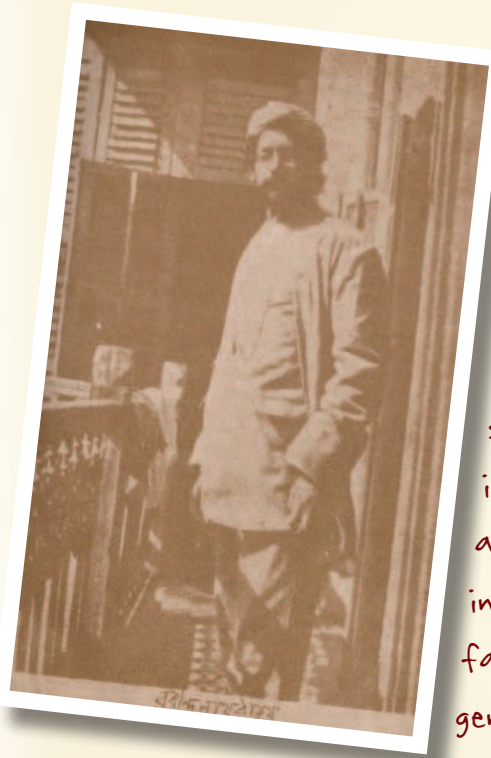


Must we look after the road so that the gentfolk can come and go with ease?

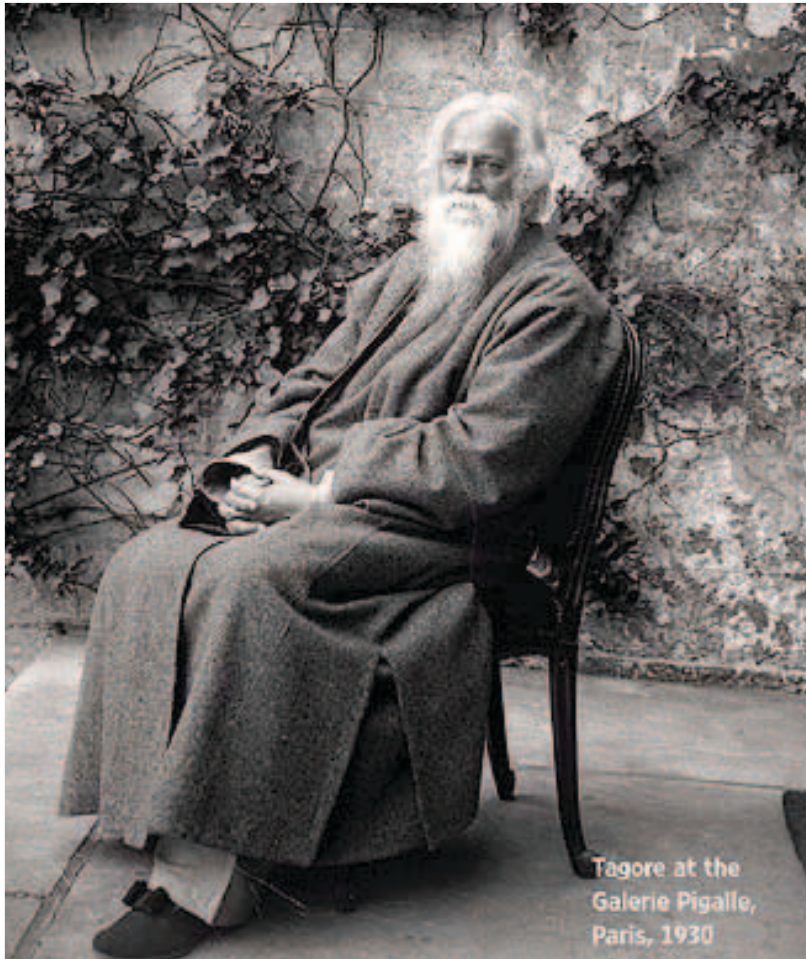
The upkeep of this road is your responsibility. You can easily get together and repair the ruts.

My Observations & Views

What tortured me in my school days was the fact that the school had not the completeness of the world. So long as I was forced to attend school, I felt an unbearable torture. I often counted the years before I would have my freedom. I afterwards realised that what then weighed on my mind was the unnatural pressure of a system of education which prevailed everywhere.



"Rabindranath's experiences at Jorasanko provided him with a lifelong conviction concerning the importance of freedom in education. He also realized in a profound manner the importance of the arts for developing empathy and sensitivity, and the necessity for an intimate relationship with one's cultural and natural environment. In participating in the cosmopolitan activities of the family, he came to reject narrowness in general, and in particular, any form of narrowness that separated human being from human being. He saw education as a vehicle for appreciating the richest aspects of other cultures, while maintaining one's own cultural specificity." - K. M. O'Connell (2003)



I was brought up in an atmosphere of aspiration, aspiration for the expansion of the human spirit. We sought freedom of power in our language, freedom of imagination in our literature, freedom of soul in our religious creeds and that of the mind in our social environment. Such an opportunity filled me with confidence in the power of education which is one with life and which can give us real freedom - the highest that is claimed for man, his freedom of moral communion in the human world.

Santiniketan and My Philosophy of Education

In December 1901, I moved with my family to my father's ashram in Santiniketan. It was my response to constructive nationalism.

Starting the school, Brahmacharya Ashram at Bolpur was an endeavour to take education into our own hands and make it as indigenous as possible. Fortunately for me, I already had a place ready at hand where I could begin my work.

My father had selected this lonely spot as one which was suitable for his life of communion with God. He dedicated this space for the use of those who seek penance and seclusion for their meditation and prayer.

I had about ten boys with me, when I came here and started my new life with no previous experience whatsoever.



All around our ashram is vast open country, bare up to the line of the horizon except for sparsely growing stunted date palms and prickly shrubs struggling with ant-hills. A road used by the village people goes meandering through the lonely fields, with its red dust staring in the sun. Travellers coming up this road can see from a distance, the spire of the temple and the top of the Brahmacharya Ashram, among its 'amlaki' groves and its avenue of stately 'sal' trees.

I wanted my school to be like the ancient hermitages we know about. There were no luxuries, the rich and poor lived alike like ascetics. I could not find the right teachers to combine today's practices with yesterday's ideals. The school was started with my meager funds; I sold all my books, and my copyrights to carry on.

At first my objective was purely patriotic, but later it grew more spiritual. Poverty brings us in complete touch with life and the world.

I provided this great teacher - this bareness of furniture and materials - not because of poverty, but because it leads to a personal experience of the world.



From childhood to adolescence and again from adolescence to manhood, we are coolies of the goddess of learning, carrying loads of words on our folded backs.

Children are in love with life, and it is their first love. All its colour and movement attract their eager attention. Are we quite sure of the wisdom of stifling this love?

The first thing I did was to take my son, Rathi away from the town into a village and allow him the freedom of primeval nature as far as it was available. He had a river, where he swam, and rowed. He spent his time in the fields and on the trackless sandbanks, coming late for meals without being questioned. He had a better opportunity for a real experience of this Universe than I ever had.



It was 1905. I did not fail to lay emphasis on the truth that we must win our country, not from any foreigner, but from our own inertia, our own indifference.

The work I began in Santiniketan was God's field for poetry. I sought help from the elements to establish my enterprise and, in my gladness, tried to instill in the students' minds, the songs of the seasons and the celebration of nature.

The ashram grew from a creative spirit.

The school was conceived to free the students' minds from blind superstition, leading them to a state of creative unity where they would respect human beings irrespective of caste and creed.



I had no experience in this line at all. But I had confidence in myself, as I had profound sympathy for children.

I selected this spot where the sky was unobstructed till the verge of the horizon. The mind could have its fearless freedom to create its own dreams, while the seasons came and went, with all their colours and beauty filling the very heart of the human dwelling.

Here, I gathered a few children around me, and I taught them.





I was their companion. I sang to them. I composed musical pieces, operas, plays and they took part in the performances. I recited to them our epics and - such were the beginnings of our school.

My idea was that education should be part of life itself, and must not be detached from it and be made into something abstract.

The children had perfect freedom to do what they wished, as much liberty as was possible for me to give them. And I tried to make their activities all the more interesting for them.

The subconscious mind is more active than the conscious one, therefore it was important to surround them with all kinds of activities which could stimulate their minds and gradually arouse their interest.

I tried to inculcate in my students, a love of nature, a love of everything that constituted the essence of life. We celebrated every changing season - spring, summer, rains and winter. Education would be an activity of joy. An atmosphere was created, which provided them with a natural impulse to live in harmony with nature.





I had musical evenings - not merely music classes. Those boys who did not have any special love of music, would listen to our songs from outside, out of curiosity and would gradually be drawn in. I invited great artists to live here, and whilst they went on with their work, the students would watch them and saw day-by-day how those great works of art developed.

I always tried to get lecturers from Europe and the Far East to come and be with us. Our students were very natural with the foreign guests. My idea was that the mind should find its freedom in every respect and I am sure our children have freedom from barriers of country, race, creed and sects.

It was important that the students also understood responsibility and discipline through 'self-governance'. The committees which the boys formed were and still are intended to deal with all the aspects of the school life in which the boys are themselves vitally interested."



1921: Sriniketan, My Rural Reconstruction School - with Elmhirst

I wrote a letter to the American agricultural scientist, Leonard Elmhirst about rural reconstruction, as he had shown much interest in working in India.

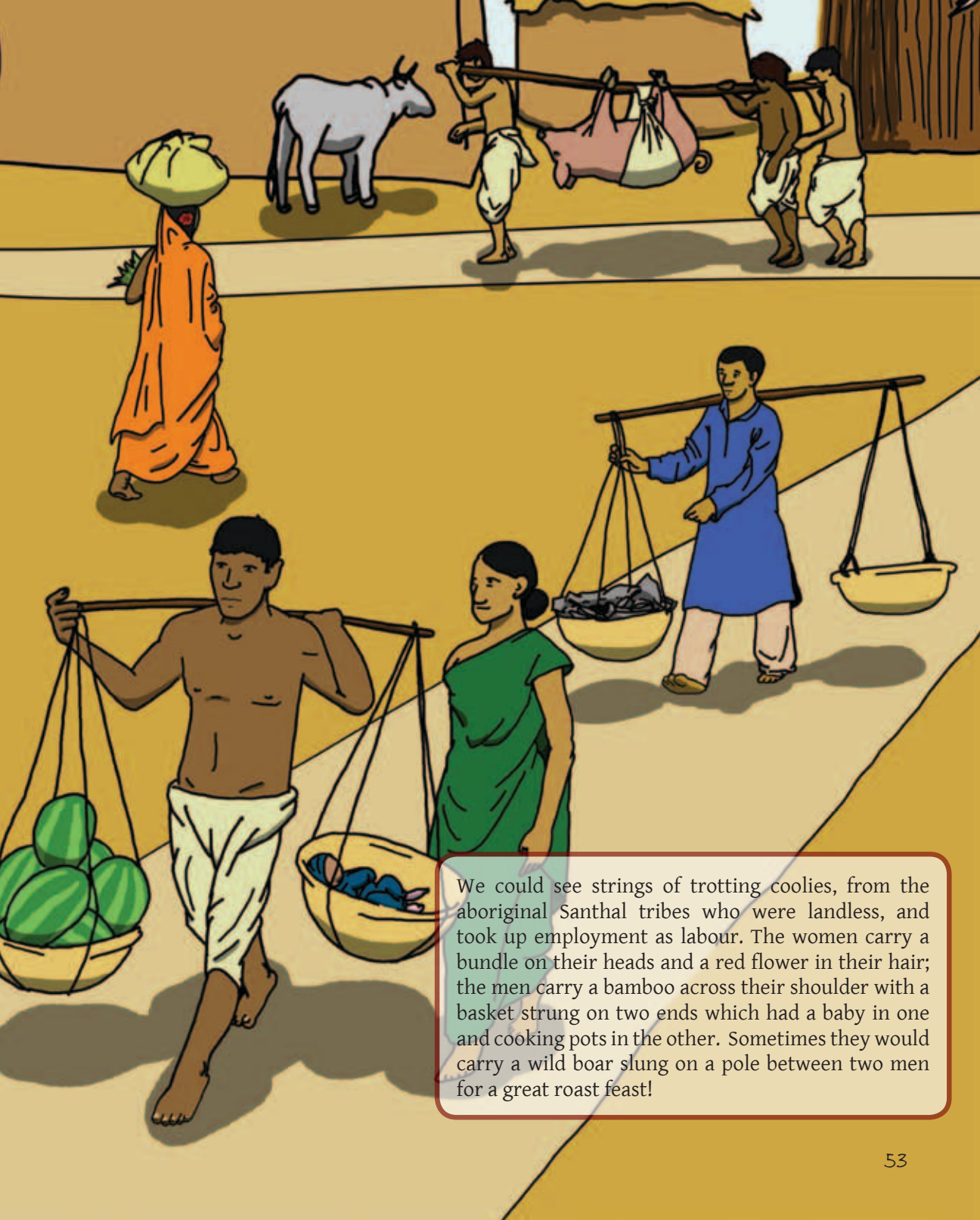
"The villages around my school at Santiniketan in West Bengal seem to me, to be dying. Yet all of them, Hindu, Muslim and primitive Santal, show signs that they once enjoyed a decent economic and social condition and a culture that no longer survives. The villagers too seem quite unable to help themselves. When I was quite a young man, my father put me in charge of our family estate in East Bengal, and there I tried my own experiments. Some years ago I bought a farm with further experiments in mind outside the village of Surul, a mile and a half from my school at Santiniketan. You say you were interested in what you saw of the Indian village and its problems, in 1917. Come to India and live on this farm. Try to find out what is happening, and what the cause of the trouble is, what can be done to help the villagers to help themselves and to stand on their own feet. Train up some of my staff and students if you can. Will you come? Then why not sail with me tomorrow."

Elmhirst narrates...

"November, 1921, I reached Bolpur and was taken to meet Tagore, fondly called 'Gurudev'. Under the mango tree sat the kindly old poet, who was full of pleasant words of welcome. We sat together and discussed the plan, to which he said 'for years we have been waiting for something like this.'

Following that I visited the Surul farm with others to put our plan to purposeful action. We took up residence on the Gurudev's farm in February 1922, with a small staff and some ten college students, all of whom said they wanted to be farmers. We fixed up our latrines, started gardens, houses and workshops, defeated the marauding monkeys, and settled in. After some months we called ourselves an, 'Institute of Rural Reconstruction,' which was later named by Tagore, as Sriniketan, which in Sanskrit means 'The Abode of Grace.'

Out of his own experience as a teacher and from his study of our work in Sriniketan with the village boys, Tagore was convinced that some new form of schooling could be worked out for village children in India, based upon immediate contact with the world of nature and with the life, the beauty and the problems of the countryside."



We could see strings of trotting coolies, from the aboriginal Santhal tribes who were landless, and took up employment as labour. The women carry a bundle on their heads and a red flower in their hair; the men carry a bamboo across their shoulder with a basket strung on two ends which had a baby in one and cooking pots in the other. Sometimes they would carry a wild boar slung on a pole between two men for a great roast feast!

Inspired by Tagore... WW Pearson in his book Shantiniketan, published in 1916

"Does it seem as if this ashram were too remote and monastic for the training of boys who, when they leave school, have to struggle in the modern world? Can we not say rather, that perhaps here they may acquire what the modern world most needs, that wealth of mind's tranquility which is required to give life its balance when it has to march to its goal through the crowd of distractions? Whatever may be the practical outcome of this experiment in education, which strives to combine the best traditions of the old Hindu system of teaching with the healthiest aspects of modern methods, there can be no doubt that the ideal is a high one. Let me tell more of what these ideals are and how the boys and teachers of the school strive to carry them into practice.

To the Western eye the outward aspect of the School would suggest poverty. The emphasis on efficient and expensive equipment which is a characteristic feature of institutions of learning in the West has never been accepted in India, where simplicity of living is regarded as one of the most important factors in true education. The utmost simplicity is found in all the buildings which are used by the boys for their own daily life.



When the small boys take up an idea and try to put it into practice then there is always a freshness about it which is spontaneous and full of the joy of real creation. The boys are encouraged to think and write for themselves, and one or two of those who have illustrated manuscript magazines have proved to be artists of real ability.



Occasionally, excursions are planned for the whole school, either for the day, or for several days to some place of historical interest. The day is spent in the open air, singing and games forming the chief part of the programme with story telling by some of the teachers. On moonlit nights, especially, many of the boys go out for long walks with the teachers, and in this way the bond between the masters and the pupils becomes deep and strong. The teachers live in the dormitories with the boys, and are able therefore to help them in their work and share with them their daily life.



The boys are trusted very largely to look after their own affairs, and have their own committees in the different sections of the School, and organise the general meetings of all the students in the ashram, when questions affecting the whole School are brought up for discussion. During examinations they are left to themselves on the basis of trust. When an examination takes place the boys may be seen in all sorts of places writing their answers, even in such inaccessible places as the fork of some high tree!"

Satyajit Ray...

"I consider the three years I spent in Santiniketan as the most fruitful of my life ... Santiniketan opened my eyes for the first time to the splendors of Indian and Far Eastern art. Until then I was completely under the sway of Western art, music and literature. Santiniketan made me the combined product of East and West that I am."

Ray was born in 1921 to a distinguished family of artists, litterateurs, musicians, scientists and physicians. He joined Tagore's school at his mother's insistence and with encouragement from Tagore who was a friend of his late father. He was trained in drawing at Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan. While in Santiniketan Ray learned to draw from the great teacher, Nandalal Bose, a pioneer in art education in modern India. The other teacher who made an abiding impression on him was Binode Behari Mukherjee. Calligraphic elements entered his otherwise modernist oeuvre. With his natural talent in drawing, Ray later developed and deployed this element in his illustrations and graphic designs. - Dilip Basu





Amartya Sen...

"I am partial to seeing Tagore as an educator, having myself been educated at Santiniketan. The school was unusual in many different ways, such as the oddity that classes, excepting those requiring a laboratory, were held outdoors (whenever the weather permitted). No matter what we thought of Rabindranath's belief that one gains from being in a natural setting while learning (some of us argued about this theory), we typically found the experience of outdoor schooling extremely attractive and pleasant.

Academically, our school was not particularly exacting (often we did not have any examinations at all), and it could not, by the usual academic standards, compete with some of the better schools in Calcutta. But there was something remarkable about the ease with which class discussions could move from Indian traditional literature to contemporary as well as classical Western thought, and then to the culture of China or Japan or elsewhere. The school's celebration of variety was also in sharp contrast with the cultural conservatism and separatism that has tended to grip India from time to time."

Ashok Sircar...

studied at Patha Bhawan, Santiniketan and is a Faculty Member at Azim Premji University

"The First Lesson: Climbing a Guava Tree

On a chilly morning in November 1959, when dew drops still covered the grass, a three and half year old boy started going to Ananda Pathshala, a pre-school learning and fun centre at Santiniketan.

On the first day, Preeti Maashi, one of the teachers there, asked him if he could climb the guava tree standing in the middle of the arena. He replied no. Preeti Mashhi informed him that Durba who joined only a week ago has already learned to climb the tree, and he should also learn to do so quickly.

Ananda Pathshala was a two-storied building surrounded by trees, a small shallow pond, and lots of open space to run in, quarrel, play and sleep! The boy quickly learnt many things - climbing trees, plucking fruits, nurturing small plants, making garlands from flowers, getting happily wet in the rains, feeding the cats, dogs and birds, singing a few Tagore songs, drawing on paper and on other people's clothes, learning poems, and a little bit of writing.



Circles of Learning

Two years later, the boy joined Tagore's school. The classes were held under the trees - the students would sit in a semicircular formation. Every teacher had one such place, a bedi, so the students used to hop from one class to another. The semicircular sitting arrangement had its advantages - everyone could see each other but it wasn't easy to be naughty and hide! The best part was that there was no division among students. A portable blackboard was used which the students themselves erected on its stand.

The School for Service

The following year, the boy was appointed secretary of Seva Vibhag. Their task was to assemble a team of volunteers from the students and then, for three months, approach the residents of Santiniketan to collect items that they wanted to dispose of, select acceptable items and distribute them in a Santhal village.

This was to be done on every weekend. The work was laborious, but left an important realization that the Santhals did not like these offerings. What they did want was for the night schools to be restarted.

The Many Charms of Tagore's School

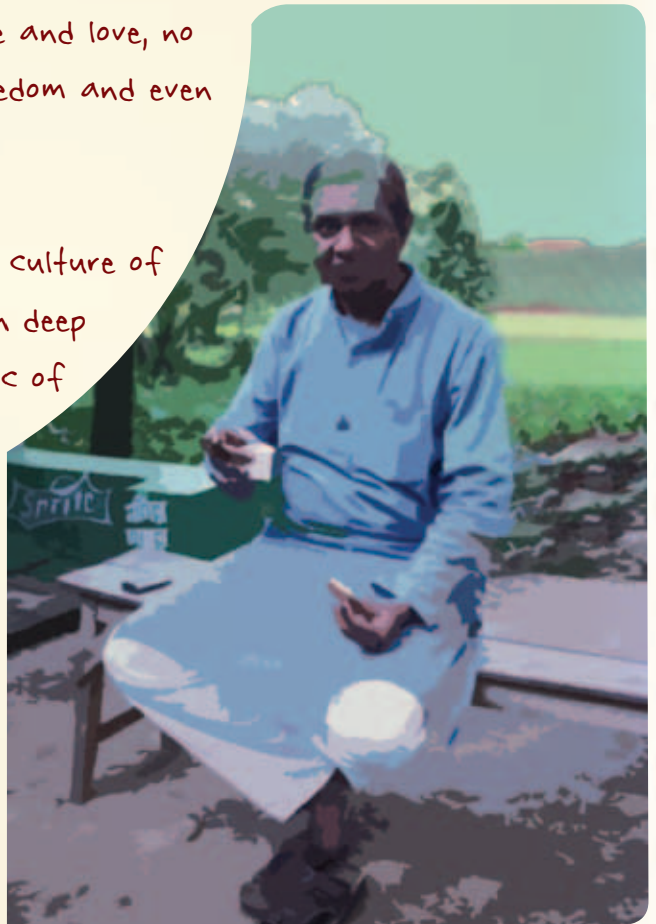
As the boy grew, he started realizing the true charm of Tagore's School. For one, cultural and art classes continued up to class XI, without a break.

The second was learning things outside the class room. When Rukmini Devi Arundale, the accomplished BharatNatyam dancer, visited Santiniketan with her team, the school students were to organise the entire event.

This boy had to interact with her to understand her ideas of the stage, its height, width, lights, wings, for each of the three performances and implement them accordingly.

The third lure was the freedom to arrive uninvited anywhere and anytime for any event or activity. School students were treated with special care and love, no one objected to their freedom and even audacity at times.

The fourth charm was a culture of non-competition that ran deep in the institutional fabric of Santiniketan. This led to no student ever feeling tense or depressed about his or her performance in any subject. It was recognized and easily accepted that everyone could not be equally good in all areas.





The School as the World

Growing up in Tagore's school had many dimensions. Firstly the exposure to various aspects of creation, from the sciences, arts, music, literature, theatre, to films.

Secondly, the idea of a school as a revelatory experience and not just a learning experience in the technical sense.

Thirdly, the idea that a school or a University can go beyond a work place (Karma Kshetra) to become a living place (Jeevan Kshetra).

Fourthly, the realisation that the school, the university, other organs of the institution, ceremonies, extension programmes are all complementary to each other and not islands in themselves.

Many years have passed since that chilly morning in November 1959 when the boy first set foot in Ananda Pathshala. Today he is a gray haired gentleman, who remembers those magical days in Tagore's school, as if they happened yesterday."

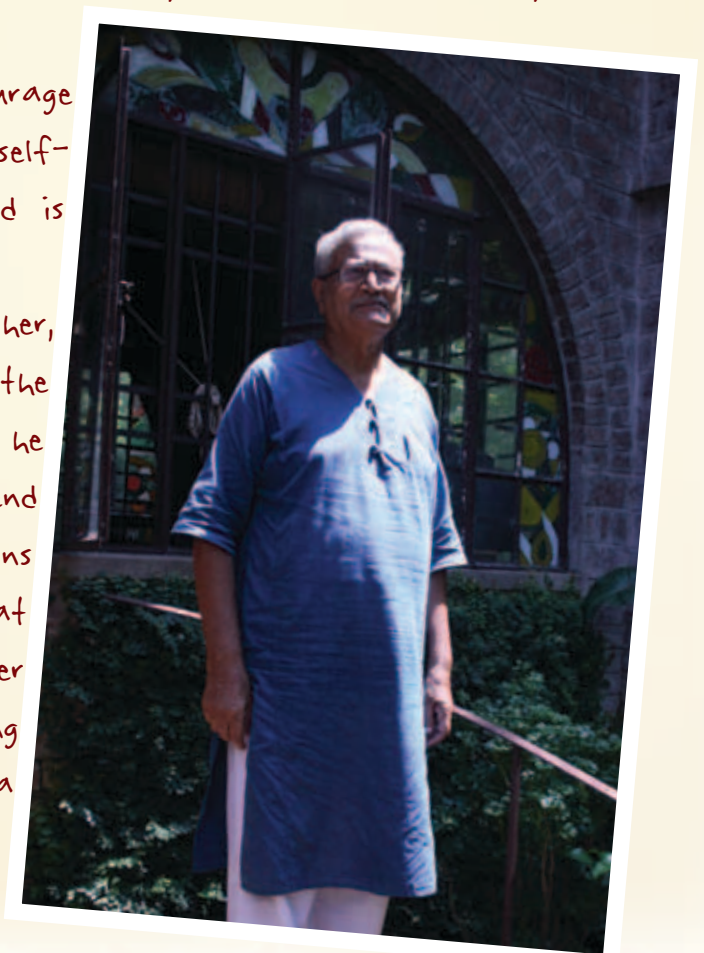
Supriyo Tagore...

Retired as principal of the school his great grand uncle Tagore, established and now runs Shishu Theerto, a school for educating tribal children and orphans of the area.

"Gurudev's ideals and vision if followed sincerely would imbue all children with the joy of learning. This 'anand' comes from creating an environment of cooperation and harmony, full of natural beauty and filled with love.

It is important to encourage the sense of enquiry and self-expression which every child is born with.

Tagore is a true teacher, philosopher and guide for the present generation because he believed that bookish trend and competitive examinations should be removed, so that students can achieve a higher level of education, learning from nature and at a spiritual level."





TAGORE'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION:

MAKE THE CHILDREN AS FREE AS POSSIBLE—GIVE STUDENTS THE FREEDOM TO EXPLORE AND TO QUESTION, TO ENGAGE IN CREATIVE ACTIVITIES AND USE THEIR IMAGINATION FREELY. AT PATHA BHAWAN, STUDENTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO VIEW EDUCATION AS AN ACTIVITY OF JOY BY THEIR TEACHERS.

MAKE LESSONS ENJOYABLE— CONDUCT LESSONS IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF FEARLESSNESS AND WHENEVER POSSIBLE OUTDOORS. NATURE WALKS SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE CURRICULUM AS A REGULAR PRACTICE. TEACH THROUGH THE CELEBRATIONS OF SEASONS – BE IT SPRING (BASANT UTSAV) SUMMER, RAINS, WINTER (POUSH MELA), OR A HARVEST FESTIVAL THERE CAN ALWAYS BE A REASON TO CELEBRATE AND LEARN.

MAKE LESSONS LIFE-CENTRIC
– LET CHILDREN EXPLORE THEIR SURROUNDINGS AND LEARN ABOUT LIVELIHOODS, AGRICULTURE, INDUSTRY AND COMMUNITIES IN A PRACTICAL WAY - BY TAKING PART IN TILLING, SOWING, HARVESTING, ANIMAL HUSBANDRY AND WORKSHOPS IN PRINT, POTTERY, TEXTILES, CARPENTRY OR COMPUTERS.

BAN CORPORAL PUNISHMENT - TAGORE DID NOT BELIEVE THAT PUNISHMENT AND THE RESULTANT FEAR WOULD CREATE GOOD STUDENTS. INDISCIPLINE CAN BE CORRECTED BY EXAMPLE AND BY INTRODUCING SELF GOVERNANCE.



VALUABLE LESSONS FOR OUR SCHOOLS

INTROSPECTION ON ONE'S WRONG DOING SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED. TEACH THE STUDENTS THAT WITH FREEDOM COMES RESPONSIBILITY. FOR EXAMPLE, THE VICHAAR SABHA IN SANTINIKETAN WAS RUN BY STUDENTS TO PASS THE APPROPRIATE RULING ON ANY ERRANT OR INDISCIPLINED BEHAVIOR.

INCULCATE SENSE-TRAINING – EMPHASIZE ON EXPERIENCES TO DEVELOP AND HEIGHTEN THE SENSES OF TASTE, SMELL, SIGHT, HEARING AND TOUCH. FOR EXAMPLE TAKE CHILDREN OUT ON DAYLIGHT AND MOONLIGHT WALKS, ENCOURAGE VISUAL AND TACTILE LEARNING. REGIONAL FOOD MELAS, SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS MELAS SHOULD BECOME THE RULE RATHER THAN THE EXCEPTION.

INNOVATIVE GAMES – TO MAKE THE MIND ALERT, TO ACTIVATE AND ENGAGE THE STUDENT'S NATURAL CURIOSITY. MENTAL MATH, GEOMETRY THROUGH PAPER SCULPTURE, GAMES TO UNDERSTAND SCIENCE OR HISTORY OR ANY SUBJECT ARE SOME POSSIBILITIES.

DISCUSSION AND DISCOURSE – REMOVE THE MISPLACED STRESS ON 'MEMORISED' LEARNING. FOR EXAMPLE CREATE STUDENT CIRCLE TIMES TO BRING TOGETHER GROUPS, ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION AND LEARNING WILL FOLLOW.

GENERAL REVIEWS – ASSESSMENT BETWEEN PRIMARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOLS WITHOUT EXAMINATIONS.

Contributed by Supriyo Tagore, Santiniketan



The Importance of Tagore's Ideals Today

Amartya Sen writes in 'Tagore and His India'

Education and Freedom

Tagore identified the lack of basic education as the fundamental cause of many of India's social and economic afflictions:

"In my view the imposing tower of misery which today rests on the heart of India has its sole foundation in the absence of education. Caste divisions, religious conflicts, aversion to work, precarious economic conditions - all centre on this single factor."

Tagore was concerned not only that there be wider opportunities for education across the country (especially in rural areas where schools were few), but also that the schools themselves be more lively and enjoyable. He himself had dropped out of school early, largely out of boredom, and had never bothered to earn a diploma. He wrote extensively on how schools should be made more attractive to boys and girls and thus more productive. His own co-educational school at Santiniketan had many progressive features. The emphasis here was on self-motivation rather than on discipline, and on fostering intellectual curiosity rather than competitive excellence.

India Today

Tagore would see illiteracy and the neglect of education not only as the main source of India's continued social backwardness, but also as a great constraint on the possibility and reach of economic development in India (as his writings on rural development forcefully make clear). Tagore would also have strongly felt the need for a greater commitment and a greater sense of urgency in removing endemic poverty.

At the same time, Tagore would undoubtedly find some satisfaction in the survival of democracy in India, in its relatively free press, and in general the 'freedom of mind' that post-independence Indian politics has, on the whole, managed to maintain.

Tagore was concerned that people not be dominated by machines, but he was not opposed to making good use of modern technology. "The mastery over the machine," he wrote in *Crisis in Civilization*, "by which the British have consolidated their sovereignty over their vast empire, has been kept a sealed book, to which due access has been denied to this helpless country." Rabindranath had a deep interest in the environment - he was particularly concerned about deforestation and initiated a "festival of tree-planting" (*vriksharopana*) as early as 1928.

To My Country

Where The Mind is Without Fear

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the depth of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit
Where the mind is led forward by thee
Into ever-widening thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

For Tagore it was of the highest importance that people be able to live, and reason, in freedom. His attitudes toward politics and culture, nationalism and internationalism, tradition and modernity, can all be seen in the light of this belief.

- Amartya Sen, Tagore and his India



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Images

1. **Introduction:** Kolkata Bourne 1860: <http://sesquicentennial.blogspot.in/2010/04/early-life-of-rabindranath-tagore-contd.html>.
2. **Santiniketan and My Philosophy of Education, Inspired by Tagore: WW Pearson, and Where The Mind Is Without Fear:** Mukul Chandra Dey's early watercolour sketches of the Ashram have been used in the book with permission from his grandson, Satyasree Ukil.
3. **My Observations and Views:** Rabindranath Tagore at the Galerie Pigalle, Paris, 1930 Courtesy - <http://www.antaradiary.com/photography-rabindranath-tagore/> Courtesy - <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?262326>.
4. **I Cannot Remember My Mother:** Woman with her child in her lap: A 1913 illustration by Asit Kumar Haldar for "The Beginning", a prose-poem in *The Crescent Moon*.
5. **My Poetry:** The waterfall of Amida behind the Kiso Road by Katsushika Hokusai http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Katsushika_Hokusai
6. All the other photographs in the book are from the Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

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Azim Premji University

Azim Premji University has a clear social purpose – to make significant contributions towards a just, equitable, humane and sustainable society. The University aspires to do this through the development of talent and the creation of knowledge which can facilitate significant improvements in education and allied development areas.

The roots of Azim Premji University lie in the learning and experience of a decade of work in elementary education by Azim Premji Foundation. The University is one of the Foundation's key responses to the constraints and challenges confronting the education and development sectors in India.

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The 'People and Ideas' initiative of Azim Premji University, is an attempt to explore the ideas, lives and works of the many social reformers, artists, scientists, philosophers and educationists who have influenced us deeply. During this process we hope to develop a platform to understand, engage with and discuss the ideas that have fundamentally shaped our vision and philosophy.

We begin this series with a graphic novel on Rabindranath Tagore's ideas and philosophy of education. Tagore is an educator for all times and his ideas are as relevant today, as they were when he lived.



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