

Tagore's Brahmacharyasram: Is it Just a Way to Bridge the Gap between Theory & Practice in Modern Indian Educational System

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ABSTRACT

Tagore's Brahmacharyasram (later known as Shantiniketan) is a famous place where he advocated giving the students proper education under the open air. It is quite similar with the ancient India's Tol and Chatuspathi system. In this dissertation I want to focus upon the hidden causes behind the establishment of Brahmacharyasram. In the thoughts of the critics, Brahmacharyasram was established just to help the National self-help agenda taken by Indian politicians of that time and to throw a challenge to the British administrative power after the Bengal Partition conspiracy in 1905. But in this article I want to show Tagore's Brahmacharyasram was his dream project where in one hand he wanted to help the poor villager's wage-earning procedure by establishing Sriniketan; there on the other hand he tried to set a new educational goal, different from the on-going British system of education, to be achieved by the young pupils of Visva-Bharati. Tagore's Shantiniketan attains both these two goals successfully and seems necessary for the advancement of National system of Education after 1905 in Bengal and also in India.

Keywords: Brahmacharyasram, Shantiniketan, Sriniketan, National Self-Help program, Tagore.

INTRODUCTION

Brahmacharyasram [later became famous in the name of Shantiniketan] was conceived as the dream of Tagore where in the natural atmosphere of Gurukula the students obtain the opportunity to gather knowledge. His notion of education is influenced by that of the Vedic R̥sis. In Veda, this type of Gūrukula Sikṣa is encouraged where the mutual bond between teacher and students are naturally bound to be increased. The students have to follow the teacher even if he is wrong or partial. The example could be drawn from Mahabharata, Eklavya and Karna, none of these two as students got the opportunity to please their Gurus; but none of them even dare to complain against their teachers, respectively Dhrona and Parashuram. It seems quite amazing when from newspapers we learn that in 21st century India, the students even do not hesitate to hit their masters so brutally that can bring instant death immediately. The example of Bhopal and Chennai is much recent among them. In this

atmosphere, mutual hate and distrust surrounds the entire atmosphere of our educational fields. How could we get rid of that? In its answer we have to go back to Vedas and Tagore.

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN VEDAS

In the Vedas, the mutual relationship between teacher and student can be outlined in such a brief form

- Mutual trust for each others;
- *Sradhha* or Devotion to the master;
- Acceptance of his words without questioning;
- Showing *Respect* to the teacher etc.

Main Problem to be Discussed

Unfortunately all of these qualities are lacking in students of the 21st century. Most of them are so impatience to receive the Degrees that they never dare to use wrong ways. They even kill their teachers brutally for suspending, expelling

or just for punishing them. Where are we going? Are we going towards the end of the century or towards the end of teacher-student relationship? In this present article, I would like to cite the true and superb examples drawn from Tagore and his relation with the pupil in *Shanti-Niketan*. Our main focus in this article is upon searching for the true reason behind the establishment of *Visva-Bharati* or *Shanti-Niketan* (formerly *Brahmacharyasram*). Is its establishment just a demand for the National Self-Help program of that time India or there is any broader necessity felt by Tagore?

Tagore on Brahmacharyasram:

It was plainly thought that Tagore was so much concerned with the conditions of the poor people residing within his own territory and also for all those of entire Bengal. So the basic aim of establishing *Brahmacharyasram* (later known as *Shantiniketan*) was included within this fact. Before going to discovering the causes of establishing *Shantiniketan*, let us at first start to discover the reasons hidden behind the establishment of *Sriniketan* (a part of *Shantiniketan*).

Among most contemporary Indian political thinkers, mainly Tagore and Gandhi became quite related with the daily life-style of poor villagers. And thus both of them wanted to uplift India from the core of it, i.e. the villages. As a *Zamindar* of East Bengal, Tagore had to spend most of his life in the rural Bengal and here he became indulged with the daily pleasure-Pain experiences of the villagers. His short stories depict the true picture of his indulgence with the rural Bengal. Hence it was quite natural for him to think for the rural upliftment.

He stressed upon the wage-earning facility for the poor villagers. Though he did not admit that education is a means of earning bread alone, but he admitted that as an intimate part of any sound educational system. In 1922, the *Palli Sangathan Bibhag* was made by him, which was renamed as *Sriniketan* in 1923. T. N. Ganguli discovered from 'The Bulletin of *Visva-Bharati*' that 'The objective of *Sriniketan* is to bring back life in its completeness into the villages making their self-reliant and self-respectful, acquired with the cultural standard of their own country and competed to make an efficient use of modern resources for the improvement of their (the villagers) physical, intellectual and

economic condition'¹. For giving education among villagers, *Sriniketan* was divided into various departments, e.g. agricultural department, industrial department, educational department, rural reconstruction department and *samavaya*. The foundation of *Shiksha-Satra* served as a means of not only earning livelihood of these poor villagers, but also to equip them the necessary training for the improvement of the rural Bengal.

Tagorean Rural Reconstruction Model

We can find out the Rural Reconstruction model in several writings of Tagore. His familiarity was as a renowned poet, but he was also considered as one of the pioneer of rural development program. He started rural reconstruction project at *Sriniketan* in 1921 aiming to make villagers self-reliant and able to use all rural resources fully. Tagore realized that this problem of rural reconstruction were manifold and it was co-related with health, economy, education etc. essential parts, and these parts are as well as inter-linked with each other. The objectives of the program, in the words of Elmhirst depicted as follows – 'from the outset, we had two main objectives, to survey the economic, social and scientific needs of the cultivator in his home, village and fields, and secondly to carry out our own laboratory experiments in health, education, craft, cultivation and animal husbandry'². Accordingly Tagore laid emphasis on economical background of villagers. Regarding economic development Tagore's aspiration was to make the peasants self-developed and he truly realized that economic advancement should be done on the scientific ground. In this procedure, he considered education as one of the important corollaries, because the educational development of rural children remains as the foundation of the rural reconstruction program. Without proper education nobody can be able to realize the essentiality of the village reconstruction procedure. And the village welfare department of the institute [*Sriniketan*] from the very beginning took the program of health and sanitation in the surrounding villages. In the year 1929, the institute treated 6760

¹ Gangopadhyaya, T., p. 86

² Elmhirst, Leonard K., *Poet and Plowman*, *Santiniketan*: Calcutta, 1961, p. 582

patients.³ Tagore firmly believed that poverty, disease, depopulation, joylessness and backwardness of rural area could be removed only through co-operative efforts of village reconstruction. In this regard, we can discover his theory is quite bit similar with that of Gandhi.

Gandhi vs. Tagore on Village Reconstruction

Actually Gandhi gave practical explanation of how to reconstruct a village thoroughly. Gandhi vividly demonstrated the true nature of self-sufficient village communities by mentioning – ‘My [Gandhi’s] idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic....Thus every village’s first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding Ganja, tobacco, opium and the like. The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own waterworks ensuring clean water supply. This can be done through controlled wells or tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the co-operative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability. Non-violence with the technique of *Satyagraha* and non-cooperation will be the sanction of the village community. There will be a compulsory service of village guards who will be selected by rotation from the register maintained by the village. The government of the village will be conducted by the *Panchayat* of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there will be no system of punishments in the accepted sense, this *Panchayat* will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office. Any village can become such a republic today without much interference, even from the present Government, whose sole effective connection with the neighboring villages and the centre if any’⁴. This is the

purpose of Gandhi’s creation of Village Government.

In this above context we can discover the enormous similarity of Gandhian thought with that of Sri Aurobindo. Actually Gandhi gave much more practical explanation of how to reconstruct a village thoroughly. Gandhi vividly demonstrated the true nature of self-sufficient village communities by mentioning – ‘My [Gandhi’s] idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic....Thus every village’s first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding Ganja, tobacco, opium and the like. The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own waterworks ensuring clean water supply. This can be done through controlled wells or tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the co-operative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability. Non-violence with the technique of *Satyagraha* and non-cooperation will be the sanction of the village community. There will be a compulsory service of village guards who will be selected by rotation from the register maintained by the village. The government of the village will be conducted by the *Panchayat* of five persons annually elected by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. These will have all the authority and jurisdiction required. Since there will be no system of punishments in the accepted sense, this *Panchayat* will be the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office. Any village can become such a republic today without much interference, even from the present Government, whose sole effective connection with the neighboring villages and the centre if any’⁵. This is the purpose of Gandhi’s creation of Village Government.

Tagorean Model of Village Reconstruction

Programmes

- Economic

³ Lal, Premchand, *Reconstruction and Education in Rural India*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1932, p. 78

⁴ Shriman Narayan, *the Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, ‘The Voice of Truth’, Vol. 6, p. 345-346

⁵ Shriman Narayan, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, ‘The Voice of Truth’, Vol. 6, p. 345-346

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- Educational
- Information Communication
- Health Programs
- Village Organizations
- Research & Training

Implementations

Economic implementations

- Industrial Activity : organization of creation & sale; training for village artisans : wood work, leather work, poultry, weaving & tailoring, embroidery
- Agricultural Activity
- Dairy & Poultry
- Food Stores
- Afforestation
- Leather work & Fisheries
- Food relief etc municipal activities

Educational programs & implementation

- Night Schools for Senior Citizens
- Shiksha Satra
- Lok Shiksha Sansad

Information Communication & its implementation

- Seminar
- Feeder Club
- Chalantika i.e. Mobile Library
- Village fairs, necessary for celebrating rituals

Health Programs & implementations

- Anti-Malaria activities
- Public Health related works
- Welfare: Leprosy control, Maternity, Birth control, Child health care

Village Organization & implementation

- Women's society
- Yugasangha
- Children's organization
- Clubs for performing Yatras

Training Programs & implementations

- Rural Survey
- Agricultural training
- Training for village women & midwives

- Vocational training
- Social work programs
- Land tenure program
- Teacher's training'⁶

This is in short Tagore's Village Reconstruction or *Palli Unnayan* Model followed in *Sriniketan*.

Reasons behind establishment of Visva-Bharati

But indeed it is true that just the thought of helping poor people in wage-earning did not led Tagore to create for Visva-Bharati, rather for *Sriniketan*, *Samavaya*, *Shiksha-Satra*. Tagore's Brahmacharyasram is not *Sriniketan* itself but also *Shanti-Niketan*. And the reason behind the establishment of *Visva-Bharati* is much broader than that of the reason behind the opening of *Sriniketan*. Now have a look upon these facts in brief.

Tagore truly realized that the traditional system of education under the British rule was nothing but a kind of silly joke made with the future of Indian students. In his opinion, in the name of education we make children bound to gather or even swallow several types of bookish information. So, the pupils are really very unfortunate as no one other than them suffers from such a tremendous pressure of education and have to bear extreme pain in their procedure of learning. Such signs of terror and mechanism are existent in everywhere of this traditional system of education. Hence education in this is making men mechanical, but fails to awake the Real man within him. But if education can be obtained by the pupil with happiness and freedom of acceptance, then their power of thinking and reasoning will naturally be developed. In this way the inner human being of every child will come out with fullest potentialities. And for the enhancement of the character-building procedure of the children, we need to give them proper atmosphere of learning. His own childhood memory of School perhaps played the most influencing role here. This is perhaps one of the reasons hidden behind the establishment of *Visva-bharati* (in 1918,

⁶⁶ Partha Pratim Ray, Bidhan C. Biswas & B.K. Sen, *Knowledge communication in Tagore's Model of Rural Reconstruction: an Overview*, *Annals for Library & Information studies*, 1952, 3; 2005; 94-102

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when Brahmacharyasram was renamed as Visva-Bharati).

Tagore's Fascination on Indian Education

Tagore was tremendously fascinated with the ancient Indian educational culture where education was given by the gurus and received by students living within the natural atmosphere of *Tapoban*. But that never means that, for the welfare of India we have to deny the universal truths demonstrated by modern Europe. Here his theory is quite similar than that of Sri Aurobindo. According to Sri Aurobindo, it was falsely thought that we want to fetch back the old *Tol* systems of India in the name of national education as living in this advanced age it is definitely impossible to revive the ancient system in its oldest form. It is true that past had attained success in many respects, but only for that above reason, it will be quite unjust to refute all the scientific truths of enlightened Europe.⁷ And to revive the true spirit of India we have to unite the modern scientific truth of Europe with the past glory of India. In this way, as he hoped, a greater future can emerge out of its foundation of Indian past along with the modern European present. Tagore was also maintained the same opinion like Sri Aurobindo. He too claimed that the persons, detached from nature, can only be glad of being traditionally educated after receiving some sorts of Degrees and Diplomas, but in fact they are not needed for the recreation of our nation in a newer way. Because they are completely ignorant of the real fact that nature plays a vital role to teach a child. In our traditional system, we detach a child from the nature's lap, and confine him within the clumsy atmosphere of institutions. Education grasped from nature gives a child enough chance to learn freely, and do not forcefully impose anything upon his weak shoulders as a burden. For the inner growth of a child, education acquired from nature play a very essential role. May be that is the reason for which both Tagore and Sri Aurobindo preferred the education of children given within the boundary of ashram, one in far away in Pondicherry while another in *Visva-Bharati* within West Bengal. The logo of *Visva-Bharati* was derived from Vedas by the poet in 1921 – *Yatra visvam bhavati ekanidam* ['Where the whole world forms its one single nest']

⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *On Education*, p. 9

Thus he always entitled to make a Nest for Life, Mind and Soul of Indian pupil here, which became crystal-clear from the logo of *Visva-Bharati*.

Tagorean Realisation of Real Man: Reasons for advocating Brahmacharyasram

The true realization of Tagore about the necessity of education is it must be meant for self-realization of man by the help of which he could find out his harmony with nature, with universe, with whole human race. So, also in his writing we discover the deep urge to explore man's relation with anything affecting himself as in Sri Aurobindo. For the development of the individual, the necessity of identifying the individual soul along with the universal soul is extremely necessary. Hence education helps a man to overcome all the limitations of his individual personality as well as to search for his universal personality. And this universal personality of a man can be discovered not only within himself, but also in every single moment deploring his relationship with nature and environment. Thus R. N. Sharma truly evaluated that 'He (Tagore) believes in an inner harmony between man and Nature and God. In man, again, the physical, the mental and the spiritual aspects are equally important and internally related. Therefore, like Sri Aurobindo, Tagore too believed in a multisided education with physical, intellectual, moral and religious aims'⁸. This belief helped him in his construction of *Visva-Bharati*.

Evidence from Tagorean writings

In the midst of an unprecedented political unrest and excitement, and against the whole force of the popular sentiment for the Non-cooperation Movement, he stated his views with passion in two essays, 'Satyer Abahan' (1921; The Call of Truth) and 'Shikshar Milan' (1921; The Union of Cultures). Those essays stated his goal of bringing the West on terms of equality to the India of his aspiration --- which for him had to be an India of multiple cultures; an India where the villages need to give the touch of education and dignity of life; an India building its strength and nationhood by uniting castes and communities under an enlightened leadership. He recognized that the colonial education system was out of touch with Indian life. This

⁸ Sharma, R. N., *Textbook of Educational Philosophy*, p. 320

was why he advocated for an education to first understand this weakness, and then endeavour to bridge the gap by working for village reorganization as an essential part of a new education based on self-reliance and human dignity. He wanted this education to combine local or indigenous knowledge with modern scientific know-how from which both sections of Indian society could learn and make progress. *Visva-Bharati's* 'mission of rural construction', he wrote, was to 'retard' the process of 'racial suicide'.⁹ He held firmly that organizing the villages would be the right way to spread national consciousness. He argued that national unity could become a reality only when the masses get a gut feeling about it, and that could happen if the educated classes and the masses unite in a common programme of work. Such was the sacrifice needed, according to him, to make the country free from British servitude. He criticized the Indian National Congress for looking to our alien government (in the name of Home-Rule or Colonial Self-Government) to do the work that had to be done 'by us' for the country that was 'our own'.¹⁰

Two problems working behind establishment of Brahmacharyasram

He truly realized that we were faced with two important problems: first, the poverty of our intellectual life and, second, the poverty of our material life. The *Shantiniketan-Sriniketan* institution or *Visva-Bharati* – a world university in rural Bengal – became his life-long activity to build a centre of cultures which would not only be a centre of intellectual life in India but also a centre of her economic life. He wrote, 'Our education should be in full touch with our complete life, economic, intellectual, aesthetic, social, and spiritual; and our educational institutions should be the very heart of our society. It must cultivate land, breed cattle, weave cloth, and produce the necessities of life, calling science to its aid, and uniting teachers and students in productive activities on cooperative principles whose motive force is not the greed of profit'.¹¹ At the start this program was limited to three villages in the south-west of *Shantiniketan* where his school for urban boys and girls was established in 1901. With the

problems of over three hundred million people staring him at the face, Tagore could only have hoped that his efforts would touch the hearts of his village neighbors at *Shantiniketan* and would help them reassert themselves in a bolder social order. 'I alone cannot take responsibility for the whole of India', he wrote. 'But even if two or three villages can be freed from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established. These two or three villages must be liberated fully; all must have education; there must be joy in these villages with songs and readings as in the past'.¹²

These ideas of a new education were founded upon an urge and an instinct to create a new type of humanity whose scientific-technological progress and economic development would grow through dialogue and respect for values. That was the persistent basis of Tagore's debate on India and the world in his powerful and spirited writings on education, culture, science, nationalism, internationalism. These give meaning to his stand against colonialism, discrimination and dehumanization. They give coherence to his faith in the relationship between human beings and their environment. All of his arguments were drawn directly from his life experience of the social and natural environment in which he lived a hundred fifty years ago, and we still do today. His 1919 essay *City and Village* says it all.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, I want to say that, in my opinion, Tagore's Brahmacharyasram serves both the aims of spreading education as a means of developing the Indian national life. The conjoining of the theoretical knowledge regarding the child education along with its practical use in daily life will serve his intention as well. In Sriniketan he tried to solve the problem of wage-earning of the common villagers, while in Shantiniketan he tried to give proper education to their children. Sri Aurobindo also realized the fact, but did not be able to affect the life of his disciples to earn their breads just like Tagore. Hence, in this regard, Tagore is far away from Sri Aurobindo in the proper application of educational knowledge in the lives of common Indians.

⁹ Elmhirst, *Poet and Plowman*, p. 467

¹⁰ Tagore, R.N., *Shiksha*, 'Sikshar Milan', p. 34

¹¹ Tagore, R.N., *Sriniketan: The Institute of Rural Reconstruction*, Visva-Bharati, 1928, p. 87

¹² Do, 'On Constructive Work: A Letter', *The Modern Review*, Calcutta, March 1921., p. 213

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