

HAPIETI - I

SOME RELEVANT BIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS OF TAGORE

A creative genius — an outstanding personality born on the 7th May, 1861 in the city of Calcutta in Bengal (now in West Bengal) was Rabindranath Tagore. He is popularly known to the world as Tagore. It was he who won the rarest honour by obtaining the Nobel Prize in 1913 for his memorable and unparalleled literary work named the Gitanjali. It is he who is now "greeted with enthusiasm, wonder and reverence in almost every part of the civilized world, and pictures of him are to be found in thousands of homes."¹ He was the first recipient among the Asians who were awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Rabindranath Tagore was the eighth son of Maharsi Debendranath Tagore and the grandson of Prince Dwarakanath Tagore. He, thus, inherited the diametrically opposite qualities of a Maharsi* and a Prince in his own person. He was, as it were, standing for the 'mixture of opposites'. His stalwart figure and robust appearance covered with a costly long-coat together with his long-beard flowing over his breast and curling grey hair of his head symbolise the spirit of synthesis. Such mystic appearance fascinated the

people of the world of his time and the pictures of such figure found today in 'thousands of homes' are fascinating the people of the present generation and will fascinate in the same way the innumerable people of the ages to come. The living example of his ascetic father and the inherent blood of his pomp-loving grandfather helped him to evolve some co-herent pattern of living and inspired him to such activities as might represent both the factors in his single personality. In other words, both the practical and the spiritual qualities are miraculously blended in him and expressed through his creative activities in every sphere of human life and society. "Larger numbers have been fascinated by his refined and well-chiselled lineaments, which, together with his silver locks, his flowing beard, his eyes full of mystic inspiration and his long and loose robes, have recalled to their minds the vision of a prophet of Judea or of a seer of ancient India. * * * * No poet, ancient or modern, has been received during his life time with the honour and respect with which Dr. Tagore has been greeted, whether in the West or in the East."² He was the 'Poet Laureate of Asia'. Mr. Liang Chi Chao, President, Universities' Association, Peking, addressed Tagore as the great Indian sage and poet-philosopher when he visited China in 1924.

We have already mentioned that Tagore was the poet

of poets as well as the teacher of teachers. He was not only a great poet as the world knows him to be but he was also a great teacher of his own time. But unfortunately the people of his time appreciated little and spoke little of his activities in the field of education. It was because of this fact that his world-wide fame as a poet overshadowed the glory of his outstanding experiments in education beginning from the elementary school right upto the University stage. His educational experiments also included rural education and reconstruction. That is to say, both general and practical education were equally emphasized in his programme of educational reconstruction and re-orientation. We all know that the poet started his educational experiments quite late in life and hence it was natural that they failed to receive their due recognition and appreciation by the people of his time. Moreover, the special type of educational experiments based on the Ashram ideals of the forest schools of ancient India during the British paramountcy and prevailing anglicized pattern of education caught little attention of the people. It, therefore, failed to create any confidence in the public. Tagore himself admitted this fact. In support of the above points the following lines may be quoted: "I started a school in Bengal when I was nearing forty. Certainly this was never expected of me, who had spent the greater portion of my life in writing, chiefly verses.

Therefore people naturally thought that as a school it might not be one of the best of its kinds but was sure to be something outrageously new, being the product of daring inexperience."³

Within a very short time, however, Tagore's educational philosophy and experiments attracted quite a number of scholars from different countries of the world. Many great and gifted persons of India and abroad assembled at the place of his educational experiments — Santiniketan. A good many foreign scholars, namely, F.C.Andrews, W.W.Pearson, L.K.Elmhirst, took an active part in the educational experiments at Santiniketan and Sriniketan. The latter was the place for experiment in rural education and reconstruction.

It took only twenty years to prove that the institution established for his 'outrageously new' experiments in education was 'one of the best of its kind'. Because it was not 'the product of daring inexperience' as the people thought it to be. It was, on the other hand, the product of his mature mind and that of the vast experience of long forty years. Tagore wrote: "And I know what it was to which this school owes its origin. It was not any new theory of education, but the memory of my school-days."⁴

It is, therefore, obvious from the few lines quoted above that no new theory of education of his predecessors or

of his contemporary educational thinkers made him undertake educational experiments at Santiniketan. It was the memory of his school-days which haunted him for a long time found its expression in the establishment of his school at Santiniketan in 1901 and reached its consummation in the inauguration of Visva-Bharati and Sriniketan in 1921 and 1922 respectively. His activities as a Founder-Educator of Visva-Bharati occupied the latter half of his life. He exhausted his energy and wealth for the spread of the ideals of Visva-Bharati "where the world makes its home in a single nest." To quote a few lines from Prof. Petroff's speech of welcome

Rabindranath Tagore is an active worker on the forefront of the popular education, as well as a poet and thinker. He is endeavouring, in the educational institution founded by himself in Santiniketan (near Calcutta), to solve problems regarding the formation of the human personality. This branch of work occupies an important place in his activities and makes great demands upon his energy and strength."⁵ This speech of welcome was delivered by Prof. F. N. Petroff, President, Society for Cultural Relations, Russia, on the 12th September, 1930.⁶ It is now vivid from the warm reception given by the Russian intellectuals and men of letters that the popularity of Tagore as an eminent educational thinker as well as a poet-philosopher spread far and wide within a span of thirty years. Prof. Soares also advocates that "Dr. Tagore is not only a great poetical force

but a moral force. he is not only the Poet Laureate of Asia and a great world personality, but he is the spokesman of India and the living symbol of her culture."⁷

Romain Rolland, the renowned French philosopher writes on Rabindranath Tagore as follows : "Tagore is scarcely known in France save through the solemn face of the Poet-Prophet, that imposing figure veiled in mystery, whose calm voice, harmonious gestures, and luminous brown eyes shaded by dark brows, radiate a serene majesty. When you approach him for the first time, you act involuntarily, as if in a church, and speak in a subdued voice."⁸

Impression of the French philosopher on Tagore as expressed in his philosophical language will justify what we have tried to say so long about Tagore as a poet-philosopher as well as a man and an educator. Mr. Sisirkumar Ghosh in his long introductory part of the book entitled Tagore For You edited by him refers exhaustively to the multifarious creative activities of the versatile genius. He says that besides being essentially a poet and writer of songs, dramas, novels, short stories, etc. Tagore was a "social reformer, nationalist, educational theorist and experimenter, painter, deep thinker on race relations and collaborator of a new age in human relationship."⁹ He further asserts that "It will be a mistake to think of Tagore as one who charmed us solely with the consolations of pastoral poetry and a liberal outlook, as a mild prophet cooing otiose messages. There was

more in him than that."¹⁰

Regarding Tagore's philosophy of life and philosophy of education and the aim of his educational experiments Mr. Ghosh continues, "Tagore's life and works were, then, not merely an aesthete's adventure, they also involve characteristic, enlarging moral choices in terms of an integrated or harmonious living. The founding of a school at Santiniketan (1901) later to be a University, was part of the education in fullness. Beginning with his own unhappy memory of school, which he described as a blend of hospital and gaol, he concentrated on children and emphasized creativity, the need for atmosphere, and natural surroundings. The aim was neither ascetic nor revivalistic but integrative."¹¹

Now it may be questioned that since the educational ideas of Tagore belonged to the pre-independent India, they are irrelevant and unsuitable to the life, needs and aspirations of the people of the post-independent India and at the same time they have no relevance to the current educational thoughts of the modern progressive countries of the world. Tagore's ideas and experiments were mainly based on the Ashrama ideals of the forest school of ancient India and thus they lack the propriety of modernity and scientific and technical advancement in education. But it would be erroneous to think that a great genius like Tagore was quite oblivious

of the things to come. He was fully alive to the educational progress of the different countries and the future of such progress. He travelled from 'China to Peru' and was acquainted with the modern trends in education of all the progressive countries of the world or of both the hemispheres. Besides, thoughts of greatmen are not limited to time and space. They are extra-territorial and remain immortal for the universality of spirit. Their ideas are so universal that these are suitable in all countries and in all ages. Tagore's ideas are universal and not individual or parochial. His establishment of Visva-Bharati was the luminous example of his universal approach to education. Visva-Bharati was an institution for the world-culture. His inauguration of Sriniketan after his visit to European countries was rather a supplement to his ideas of general education and an addition of a new phase to the field of technical and rural education.

To sum up the discussion it may be observed that Tagore's ideas and experiments, though these were based on the Ashram-ideals of ancient India, aimed at incorporating the merit of modernity and scientific and technical aspects of education and the universality of spirit. Thus his ideas have a great relevance even to the current educational thoughts. Proper study and investigation will convince any one that Tagore's ideas are all-embracing and ever-suitable.

It is proposed through this small piece of investigation to throw some light on the great 'national genius' and to apprise the readers of his selfless untiring activities in the field of education and to let them have a peep into his philosophy of ^{life and} education having relevance to current educational thought.

*Not so much biographical.
Sources quoted are not always trustworthy
Endograde seems to have been used
for Japan from the Japanese side
rather subjective bias, however
and out of place.*