

“from the healthful dust of the earth...:”

An Ecocritical Study of Tagorean Education System

Madhurima Neogi

Abstract:

This article focuses on Tagore’s attempt to build an educational ecosystem that foregrounded the primordial relationship between human beings and Nature. Tagore sought to position Nature as an active educator in his institution which would result in the successful development of the student into an ecocitizen. This ecophilosophy of Tagore is analyzed through critical reading of his essays on education, and the history of the development of Tagore’s educational institution at Santiniketan. Tagore, alongside demonstrating a unique eco-aesthetic in the physical development of his institution, also introduced festivals and practices that countered uncontrolled consumption of Nature which, as he insisted, would seriously disturb ecological balance. His educational philosophy, in theory and practice, emphasizes on the need to shift to a more sustainable model of living that would bring mankind back into a state of harmony with Nature.

Keywords: Ecophilosophy, Brahmavidyalaya, Anthropocentrism, Deep Ecology, Santiniketan

When India was struggling to keep up with the colonial education system that had replaced the indigenous epistemological practices, Rabindranath Tagore identified the inherent flaws of the colonial education system that had rendered education into a burden artificially and externally imposed upon Indian students. Tagore sought to posit an alternate model of education that derived its roots from the Vedic education system of Ancient India. To that, Tagore added methodologies that were born from his own theory of what ought to be necessary part of a holistic education system.

The education system posited by Tagore effectively avoids the pitfall of presuming that the natural world exists solely to serve the interests of mankind or taking the anthropocentric position that implies that action is controlled and determined by humans alone. Rather than being only an environmentalist in his approach, Tagore repeatedly emphasizes on a model that would create the subject position of the student as an ecocitizen. Tagore’s educational model not only challenges the supremacy of the Western epistemological model touted by the white colonizer as the necessary

civilizing education for the Indians, but also interrogates the suitability of accepting that model as adequate to address the educational needs of the contemporary learner. In this process, Tagore highlights the immense importance that world of nature holds as an educator for the young minds.

It is necessary to identify what exactly was the role that Tagore conceptualized Nature to be playing in his education system. It is relevant in context of the modern and varied streams of ecocritical approaches like Environmental Education, Ecocritical Pedagogy or Education for Sustainability. According to Kopnina, “While the earlier forms of EE, such as naturalist, systematic, scientific, value-centred, or holistic perceived the environment as nature, system, object of study or field of values, ESD conceives environment as ‘resource for economic development or shared resource for sustainable living’ (Sauvé, 2005, 34)”.¹ It is thus necessary to understand Tagore’s perspective on nature at a time that predated the birth of the very concept of Ecocriticism. Tagore’s spiritual philosophy that bore the heavy influence of the Upanishads and Vedas, could not possibly have viewed environment as an economic resource alone and it is particularly so in context of education. In his essay “শিক্ষাসমস্যা” or “Problems of Education”, Tagore clearly states the role that he wishes to see Nature playing in the education system:

চিরদিন উদার বিশ্বপ্রকৃতির ঘনিষ্ঠসংস্রবে থাকিয়াই ভারতবর্ষের মন গড়িয়া উঠিয়াছে।
জগতের জড়-উদ্ভিদ-চেতনের সঙ্গে নিজেকে একান্তভাবে ব্যাপ্ত করিয়া দেওয়া ভারতবর্ষের
স্বভাবসিদ্ধ হইয়াছে। ভারতবর্ষের তপোবনে দ্বিজবটুগণ এই মন্ত্র আবৃত্তি করিয়াছেন-
যো দেবোহগ্নৌ যোহপসু যো বিশ্বং ভুবনমাবিবেশ।
য ওষধিষু যো বনস্পতিষু তস্মৈ দেবায় নমো নমঃ ॥
যে দেবতা অগ্নিতে, যিনি জলে, যিনি বিশ্বভুবনে আবিষ্ট হইয়া আছেন, যিনি ওষধিতে যিনি
বনস্পতিতে সেই দেবতাকে নমস্কার করি, নমস্কার করি।
অগ্নি বায়ু জলস্থল বিশ্বকে বিশ্বাত্মা দ্বারা সহজে পরিপূর্ণ করিয়া দেখিতে শেখাই যথার্থ শেখা।
এই শিক্ষা শহরের ইন্ধুলে ঠিকমত সম্ভবে না; সেখানে বিদ্যাশিক্ষার কারখানাঘরে জগৎকে
আমরা একটা যন্ত্র বলিয়াই শিথিতে পারি।² (Tagore, 1987)

¹ Helen Kopnina, “Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): The turn away from ‘environment’ in environmental education?” in *Environmental Education Research*, 18(5), pp. 699-717.

² Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 6 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1988), pp. 580-581.

[From time immemorial, the mind of India has been developed through intimate contact with the great universal Nature. It has become habitual for India to thoroughly immerse oneself within the consciousness of the world. The Brahmins of the *tapovans* had chanted this mantra-

Yō dēbōhōagnōu yōhōpsu yō vishwang bhubanmabibēsh.

Ya oshadhishu yō banaspatishu tasmai dēbaya namō namaha

The God who is in fire, in water, immersed within the universe – the one who is in plants, in trees – I bow down to that God.

To learn to see, in completeness, fire, air, water and land, through the soul of the universe, is true learning. This learning is not properly possible in the schools of a city; there, in the factory of learning, we can only know the universe as a machine.]³

By quoting these lines, Tagore is locating the spiritual in Nature thereby cancelling any possibility of regarding Nature from a utilitarian point of view where one's concern for Nature arises from the need to ensure the continued supply of resources that human beings need from Nature. The Tagorean philosophy of education emphasizes on the need for a young learner to embrace and realize the spiritual and one of the ways to achieve the same is through understanding and valuing the innate relationship of humankind with the non-human world around. This idea of an innate relationship can be traced back to the Vedas and Upanishads that also formed the basis of Tagore's educational experiment in both theory and practice. The Brahmavidyalaya (also known as Brahmacharyashram) at Santiniketan, that later expanded to form Visva-Bharati, germinated from Tagore's desire to retrace his steps back to the Vedic model of education and found a school that based on the values and practices of the Vedic model. A close reading of Tagore's essays like "Santiniketan Brahmacharyashram", "The Problem of Education", "Education of Ashram" would immediately reveal how he was motivated by the spirit of inward inquiry as found in the Vedas and Upanishads. In the education system formulated by Tagore, the position held by nature is clearly driven home through the lines of his essay "আশ্রমের শিক্ষা" or "The Education of the Ashram" where he states,

³ The translations used in this article are made by the author of the article.

ছেলেরা বিশ্বপ্রকৃতির অত্যন্ত কাছের। আরামকেদারায় তারা আরাম চায় না, সুযোগ পেলেই গাছের ডালে তারা চায় ছুটি। বিরাট প্রকৃতির নাড়ীতে নাড়ীতে প্রথম প্রাণের বেগ নিগূঢ়ভাবে চঞ্চল। শিশুর প্রাণে সেই বেগ গতিসঞ্চার করে। বয়স্কদের শাসনে অভ্যাসের দ্বারা যে-পর্যন্ত তারা অভিভূত না হয়েছে সে পর্যন্ত কৃত্রিমতার জাল থেকে মুক্তি পাবার জন্যে তারা ছটফট করে। ... বিশ্বপ্রাণের স্পন্দন লাগতে দাও ছেলেদের দেহে মনে, শহরের বোবা কালা মরা দেয়ালগুলোর বাইরে।⁴

[Boys are very close to nature. They do not seek to lounge on couches; whenever opportunity presents itself, they seek to take their holiday on the branches of trees. The primordial stream of life courses through the veins of great and wide Nature. That flow induces vitality within the life-force of the boys. As long as they are not overcome by the habits imposed upon them by the disciplining of elders, they strive to free themselves of the trap of artificiality. ... Let the beating heart of the universe touch the mind and body of the boys—away from the dumb and dead walls of the city.]

Here, Tagore refers to that primordial relationship of humans with the world of Nature that is an apt expression of the ecological unity found in the Vedas which state the human beings are a part of the wholeness that is composed of the harmonious union of mankind, the world of nature and the divine. Man's existence, by itself, is a fragment of the wholeness and thus the "very idea of environment as an objective entity is beyond comprehension for a Vedic ṛṣi (seer)..." (Misra, 1992, p. 57). In the approach of the Vedas towards Nature, one can locate the values of Deep Ecology as according to the non-dualism of the Supreme Power, Nature manifests that very Supreme Power that ought to be venerated and cherished and by no means, viewed as a resource to be either exploited or economized. Misra explains, "Nothing exists which is not a part of everyone's existence. The distinction between Man as the enjoyer and fruits of the Earth as the material for enjoyment is conspicuous by its absence..." (ibid., p. 57-58).

In his education system, Tagore insisted that his students realize the intrinsic value of the non-human world and abide by the innate bond that exists between human beings and nature. Thus, when he formulates the working principles for his school, he writes a detailed account of how he

⁴ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 16, p. 349.

wants this goal to be attained. These working principles were laid down by Tagore in a twenty-page letter written to a teacher of the school, Kunjalal Ghosh, dated 13 November 1902. This letter can be regarded as the first constitution of Brahmacharyashram. There, he writes,

বাহিরে জগৎ এবং আমার অন্তরে ধী, এ দুইই একই শক্তির বিকাশ—ইহা জানিলে জগতের সহিত আমার চেতনার এবং আমার চেতনার সহিত সেই সচ্চিদানন্দের ঘনিষ্ঠ যোগ অনুভব করিয়া সংকীর্ণতা হইতে স্বার্থ হইতে ভয় হইতে বিষাদ হইতে মুক্তি লাভ করি। ...

যো দেবোহগ্নৌ যোহপ্সু যো বিশ্বং ভুবনমাবিবেশ।

য ওষধিষু যো বনস্পতিষু তস্মৈ দেবায় নমোনমঃ ॥

ব্রহ্মধারণার পক্ষে এই মন্ত্রই আমি বালকদের পক্ষে সর্বাপেক্ষা সরল বলিয়া মনে করি। ঈশ্বর জলে স্থলে অগ্নিতে ওষধি-বনস্পতিতে সর্বত্র আছেন, এই কথা মনে করিয়া তাঁহাকে প্রণাম করা শান্তিনিকেতনের দিগন্তপ্রসারিত মাঠের মধ্যে অত্যন্ত সহজ। সেখানকার নির্মল আকাশ এবং প্রান্তর বিশেষ্বরের দ্বারা পরিপূর্ণ, এ কথা মনে করিয়া ভক্তি করা ছেলেদের পক্ষেও কঠিন নহে।⁵

[That the world without and our intellect within us, both are the manifestations of the same power—should we know this, we would feel this intimate connection between our consciousness and the world, between our consciousness and the Eternal One and thus be freed from the narrowness of self-interest, fear and despair. ...

yo devo'gnau yo'psu yo viśvaṁ bhuvanamāviveśa

yo oṣadhīṣu yo vanaspatiṣu tasmai devāya namo namaḥ

I consider this mantra to be the simplest for the boys to acquire the understanding of Brahma. By feeling that God resides everywhere, be it in water or land, fire or trees, it would be easy indeed to bow down before him amidst the fields stretching to the horizon in Santiniketan. The pure light, sky and fields over there are filled with the Lord of creation and it would not be difficult for the boys to revere Him if they bear this in mind]

The Tagorean value system found a prominent expression in Tagore's rural reconstruction process that he undertook through Sriniketan and Siksa-Satra. At the core of Sriniketan was Tagore's

⁵ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14, pp. 303-304.

ecophilosophy that emphasized on eradicating the greed with which mankind has repeatedly exploited Nature; he wished to propagate the idea of giving back to nature both as an atonement and as a way of living in synergy with nature. The idea of human greed is underlined strongly in his essay “হলকর্ষণ” or “Ploughing the Land”:

পৃথিবীর দান গ্রহণ করবার সময় লোভ বেড়ে উঠল মানুষের। ... নানা প্রয়োজনে গাছ কেটে কেটে পৃথিবীর ছায়াবস্ত্র হরণ করে তাকে দিতে লাগল নগ্ন করে। তাতে তার বাতাসকে করতে লাগল উত্তপ্ত, মাটির উর্বরতার ভান্ডার দিতে লাগল নিঃস্ব করে। অরণ্যের-আশ্রয়-হারা আর্ষাবর্ত আজ তাই খরসূর্যতাপে দুঃসহ। ... আজ আমরা স্মরণ করব যখন পৃথিবী স্বহস্তে সন্তানকে পরিমিত অন্ন পরিবেশন করেছেন, যা তার স্বাস্থ্যের পক্ষে, তার তৃপ্তির পক্ষে যথেষ্ট ...⁶

[When it was time for mankind to receive the gifts from Nature, their greed grew exponentially. ... to satisfy their multiple needs, they kept cutting down trees and, in the process, stripped the earth naked by robbing her off the clothes from her back. They caused her air to get heated and depleted the wealth of fertility within her soil. Thus, today, the land of the Aryas is bereft of the shelter of forests and is burning in the merciless heat of sun. ... today we will remind ourselves of the time when the earth herself served sufficient food to her children – food that was adequate for their health and satisfaction ...]

Here, Tagore is stating his views on the uncontrolled consumption of Nature by mankind that has seriously disturbed ecological balance and is vociferously insisting on the need to shift to a more sustainable model of living that would bring mankind back into a state of harmony with Nature. This idea finds repeated expression in both fictional and non-fictional works by Tagore. The play *Red Oleanders* is a prominent example with its theme being based on the idea of man’s unbridled greed towards consuming the wealth of the earth. Through this ideological position and consequent action, Tagore was in anticipation of negating the cultural of commodification and blind consumerism that Antonia Dardar has vociferously critiqued:

⁶ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14, p. 382.

... the repression of the body is manifested with capitalist fervor to commodify as quickly as possible its design on the new generation. Schools are one of the most complicit institutions in the repression of the body and thus, the repression of our emotional nature, our sexuality energies, and the spiritual capacities that open us to communion with natural world.⁷

It was Tagore's aim to build an educational ecosystem the values of which could counter this subject position of educators even before it had come into pass in its entirety.

Tagore was a firm believer in the fact that close proximity of children with Nature made their minds acquire some of the best lessons possible from the classroom of Nature. Brahmavidyalaya, apart from being a school devoid of four-walled classrooms, was also a place where students were encouraged to actively engage with Nature and attune themselves to the changes of each season and the variety they brought to the great sensory feast of Nature. Kathleen O'Connell comments, "Through his art and the structure of the curriculum, he tried to convey to the students the subtle resonances which existed between the moods of nature and their own personalities".⁸ There are a number of memorial accounts that fondly recollect how the advent of rains at the onset of the monsoon was greeted in the open-air classrooms. Sudha Kanta Raychaudhury, who later served as secretary to Tagore, pens his experience as a teacher and records that while he was new to the job, one day, the sky clouded over signaling the onset of rain. He dismissed his students, telling them to enjoy frolicking out in the rain. However, he grew apprehensive afterwards and started doubting the correctness of his decision. Tagore not being present at the ashram, Raychaudhury wrote a letter informing him about the incident and perhaps anticipating approval from him. The approval was not late in coming. A gladdened Tagore wrote back expressing his joy at the students freely feasting in the banquet of nature:

... পেয়ালাভরে তোমরা প্রকৃতির সুধার ঝরণা থেকে সুধা পান কর। ... সেদিন যে ছেলেদের ক্লাসের বেড়া টপাটপ ডিঙিয়ে দৌড় দিতে দিয়েছিলে, সে খুব ভালো করেছিলে। আনন্দনিকেতনের

⁷ Antonia Darder, "An Eco-Pedagogy in the Pursuit of Social Justice and Peace" in *Social Justice, Peace, and Environmental Education: Transformative Standards*, ed. by Julie Andrzejewski Marta P. & Baltodano Linda Symcox (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. xi.

⁸ Kathleen O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2012), p. 188.

আনাগোনার রাস্তাটা তাদের খুব করে চেনা হয়ে যাক। মক্কা-মদিনা, কামস্কাটকা, কোচিন, পাটাগোনিয়ার ঠিকানা তারা যখন হয় জেনে নেবে, কিন্তু বিশ্বলক্ষ্মীর স্নেহকালের ঠিকানাটা যদি এই বয়সে খুঁজে না পায়, তবে যেদিন মস্ত পণ্ডিত হয়ে আমার মতো চোখে চশমা লাগাবে, সেদিন আর কোনো আশা থাকবে না। আর সকল শক্তির চেয়ে খুশি হয়ে ওঠবার শক্তিটা ওদের যেন পুরোপুরি ফুটে উঠতে পারে - ...⁹

[... Fill your cups and drink deep from the fountain of Nature's nectar. ... You did very well in allowing the boys to briskly jump over fences and run away on that day. May they come to know the road to the palace of joy intimately. They may learn the address of Mecca-Medina, Kamchatka, Cochin, Patagonia in their own sweet time but if they cannot find the road to Nature's loving lap, then once they grow into a great scholar and wear glasses like me, there would be no hope for them. May the power to be joyful grow more fully in them than any other power ...]

This letter is almost brimming with joy itself as Tagore sends his blessings for his students to enjoy the moods of Nature even at the cost of losing classes. His message is loud and clear that the spontaneous knowledge gained from nature would benefit students more than any book-learning. This highly characteristic letter from Tagore makes the reader wonder why Raychaudhury even felt the need of seeking Tagore's approval, particularly because by 1915 – when his letter was written – it had already grown into a custom of the ashram to dissolve classes as soon as raindrops began their descent.

Tagore cast Nature in the role of an educator, a teacher with an active agency whose sympathetic mode of teaching makes the learner imbibe those lessons spontaneously without feeling burdened by institutionalized pedagogy. Tagore compares the method of teaching deployed by a conventional school teacher with the way nature educates and concludes that the latter is far superior. He states, “The Schoolmaster is of opinion that the best means of educating a child is by concentration of mind, but Mother Nature knows that the best way is by dispersion of mind. When we were children, we came to gather facts by such scattering of mental energy, through unexpected surprises ... Facts must come fresh to children to startle their minds into full activity” (Tagore,

⁹ Sudha Kanta Raychaudhury, “Santiniketaner Smriti” in *Shantiniketaner Shekal*, ed. by S. Chattopadhyay (Kolkata: Kishalay Publication, 2019), p. 189.

1994). In order to ensure that his students were integrating into his ecosystem of education, Tagore created the ethos where the students would walk miles simply to look at the seasonal flowers in full bloom – “বসন্তে পলাশের শোভা দেখতে আমাদের চলে যেতে হত উত্তরে গোয়ালপাড়া ছাড়িয়ে কোপাই নদী পার হয়ে শেয়ালা গ্রামের জঙ্গলে। ... বসন্তে দল বেঁধে পলাশ ফুল দেখতে যাওয়ার কী উত্তেজনা আমাদের, চৈত্রে শালফুল।”¹⁰ [During Spring, in order to have a look at the beauty of Palash flowers, we had to go the jungle of the Sheyala village that was to the north of Goyalpara and across the river Kopai. ... How excited we were to go in groups to have a look at Palash flowers in Spring and Shaal flowers in the month of *Chaitra*!]. This ecosystem of education also incorporated the practice of students, particularly those of Kala Bhavana, to go for regular walks to the Santhal villages in the vicinity of the ashram in order to study the interplay of life, nature and culture in those places. In this context, perhaps it would not be a fallacy to suggest that through these walks and expeditions, Tagore was implementing nascent steps for anticipating the kind of nature walks that Adrienne Cassel describes as a part of her project at a community college in Ohio where her effort was to put into action “an experiential, ecocritical approach to teaching research writing”.¹¹ He wanted his students to absorb the knowledge that Nature dispenses so freely and in course of it, realize their innate connection with the non-human world around them. This orientation was facilitated by the unconventional celebrations that Tagore started in his school. He started the *Briksharopan Utshab* which celebrated the planting of a young sapling, the *Halakarshan Utshab* which celebrated the first ploughing of the cultivational ground, the *Barshamangal* which celebrated the onset of monsoon and *Bashantotshab* which was a celebration of the season of spring. A detailed account of the *Briksharopan Utshab* provided by Rani Chanda – a student to Visva-Bharati and wife of Anil Chanda who was personal secretary of Tagore – gives as insight into how love and respect for Nature was an integral part of life and aesthetic of the ashram:

... একটি চারা গাছ – যা রোপণ করা হবে আজ। ... ছোট একটি শিশু চারা নিয়ে এক বিরাট উৎসব। এই কোমল একটি প্রাণের কাছে কত আশা-ভরসা, কত প্রার্থনা আমাদের ... মানুষ

¹⁰ Amita Sen, *Ananda Sarbakaaje* (Kolkata: Tagore Research Institute, 1996), p. 8.

¹¹ Adrienne Cassel, “Walking in the Weathered World” in *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies*, ed. by Greg Garrard (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 27-26 (p. 28).

মানুষকে নিয়ে উৎসব করে, দেবতাকে নিয়ে উৎসব করে, আজ এই কচি কোমল চারাগাছটিও সেই সমান সম্মানের অধিকারী। (Chanda, 1984, p. 177)

[... a sapling – that which would be planted today. ... A huge festivity centers around one little sapling. So much of our hope and faith, so many prayers are devoted to this one tender little life ... human beings celebrate other humans, they hold celebrations in honour of gods, and today this tender little sapling is deserving of respect equal to that.]

Alongside celebrating and venerating plant-life, Tagore had, during the *Briksharopan Utshab* of 1926, composed five poems in the honour of the five elements – Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Sky – and those poems, together with selected Sanskrit slokas were read out as a significant part of the celebration. To Tagore, these celebrations constituted an effort to give back to Nature, at least in part, what mankind is in the constant process of consuming. So he states, “... এর দ্বারা বসুন্ধরার যে অনিষ্ট হয় তা নিবারণ করবার জন্য আমরা কিছু ফিরিয়ে দিই যেন। ধরণীর প্রতি কর্তব্যপালনের জন্য, তার ক্ষতবেদনা নিবারণের জন্য আমাদের বৃক্ষরোপণের এই আয়োজন।”¹² [... we have to give back something to heal the harm that is caused to the earth as a result (of our action). To fulfill our duty to earth, to ensure the healing of her injuries – we have organized this *briksharopan*.] It is implicit in Tagore’s statement that the man-made changes to the environment are markedly different from the evolutionary changes which have taken place organically and are thus not detrimental in nature. Tagore’s target was clearly to bring about a change in the thinking process and approach of his entire ashram – students, teachers and all the inhabitants – towards the non-human world. He wanted to create a culture of responsible mutual relationship between the human and non-human world where there would be no mindless taking from the non-human world without any consideration of the impact that the human world has on it.

Since performing arts like music, dance and theatre were essential part of the curriculum at Santiniketan, Tagore wrote a number of plays on the theme of seasons like *Sharadotshab* and *Phalguni* which were performed by his students under his direction. Nearly all aspects of education at Brahmavidyalaya and Visva-Bharati enabled the students to attune themselves with the world of nature both spiritually, artistically as well as habitually. Tagore describes the process thus:

¹² *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14, p. 373.

From the beginning I tried to create an atmosphere which I considered to be more important than the class teaching. The atmosphere of nature's own beauty was there waiting for us from a time immemorial with her varied gifts of colours and dance, flowers and fruits with the joy of her mornings and the peace of her starry nights. I wrote songs to suit the different seasons, to celebrate the coming of Spring and the resonant season of the rains following the pitiless months of summer. When nature herself sends her message we ought to acknowledge its compelling invitation. While the kiss of rain thrills the heart of the surrounding trees if we pay all our dutiful attention to mathematics we are ostracised by the spirit of universe. Our holidays are unexpected like Nature's own. Clouds gather above the rows of palm trees without any previous notice; we gladly submit to its sudden suggestion and run wildly away from our Sanskrit grammar. To alienate our sympathy from the world of birds and trees is a barbarity which is not allowed in my institution.¹³

Tagore's use of the word "barbarity" is of particular interest in this context as Tagore is asserting that mankind's ability to aptly respond to nature is a marker of his prime failing. Tagore is thus implying that the modern civilization is responsible for this unnatural separation of human beings from nature. He says, "Civilized man has come far away from the orbit of his normal life" (Tagore & Elmhirst, 1961). The barbarity occurs when man transgresses his "normal" and innate relationship with Nature and under the aegis of so-called progress of civilizations, not only turns away from nature, but also exploits nature for satisfying the demands of civilized life. This theme is invoked repeatedly by Tagore in his plays like *Rakta Karabi (Red Oleanders)* and *Muktadhara (The Waterfall)*. Tagore has described the agony he experienced as a child because he keenly felt the separation from a primordial state of belonging with Nature. He writes, "The misery, which I felt, was due to the crowded solitude in which I dwelt in a city where man was everywhere, with never a gap for the immense non-human".¹⁴ It is here, in his desire for being both in communion and harmony with the non-human world that Tagore expresses legacy of the Vedas and Upanishads

¹³ Rabindranath Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 627.

¹⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 627.

alongside coming striking close to the philosophy of the Deep Ecologists. Debarati Bandyopadhyay opines,

Following the Upanishads, Rabindranath sought the Supreme Being in nature, in a manifestation of a pantheistic sentiment. As a result, nature is supremely important, in itself, to him. We have learnt from Deep Ecology in the latter half of the twentieth century that nature should be valued for its own sake and not for exploiting potential natural resources necessary to sustain human civilization. Though Rabindranath was writing about these ideas in 1910, there seems to be a similarity between him and the Deep Ecologists regarding their views about nature.¹⁵

The idea that Tagore had anticipated the advent of Ecocritical approach is also corroborated by Ananda Lal who, in while critiquing Tagore's seasonal plays, comments:

Tagore instead stressed the healing, immanent bond between nature and humanity and, as such, became the first theatrical exponent of the Green Movement much before it had become a movement. Deep ecology and environmental consciousness, so significant on paper in India's school system, begins with *Shāradotsab* and the cycle that followed it: *Phālguni* (Play of Phālgun, Month of Spring, 1915), *Basanta* (Spring, 1923), *Shesh barshan* (Last Rainfall, 1925), *Sundar* (The Beautiful, 1926) ...¹⁶

That Tagore was successful in creating an ethos of an eco-aesthetic is attested by the artistic style that emerged as a marker of Santiniketan's identity. In Tagore's lifetime, the houses built in the ashram were kept low in height so that they do not become obstructions to the view of the boundless sky. Their earthen walls were kept unpainted partly due to the lack of funds and partly so that they quickly become weather-marked and blend naturally with their surroundings. Even the *alpana* or the decorative floor art painted during festivals, were integrated into the natural milieu as the fallen leaves and flowers on the floor were not swept away but lovingly accepted as Nature's participation in mankind's festivity. The art born from Santiniketan thus echoed this spirit of harmony. Swati Ganguly records, "... his eyes were riveted by the jade-coloured cement sculpture in front of the building. Done in an abstract style, it appeared like supple limbs entwined,

¹⁵ Debarati Bandyopadhyay, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Life of Intimacy with Nature* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2019), p. 72.

¹⁶ Ananda Lal, *Three Plays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 105-106.

or like two succulent creepers growing together to suggest an enigmatic harmony. This sculpture, known as *The Lamp Stand* (1940), was the work of Ramkinkar.”¹⁷

As the paper has already stated, Tagorean education system drew heavily from Vedas (particularly from *Atharva-Veda*) and Upanishads (particularly from *Taittiriya Upanishad* and *Kathopanishad*) and thus, the resonance of *advait* philosophy can easily be traced in it. It is the imperative of the *advait* philosophy that no hierarchy exists in the relation of human kind with the non-human world around them:

An ethical framework genuinely antihumanist at its core, singularizes the dominant Indian tradition which accorded equal status to the human and non-human spheres. Such an egalitarian view was instrumental in engendering a philosophy of immanent monism (*advaita*). Indeed, the rise of the *advaita* philosophy may be traced to the realization that human beings live in a more than human world, characterised by mutual interdependence and more importantly, that any alienation of the two spheres could spell doom for the earth.¹⁸

Tagore’s ecophilosophy bears the legacy of this philosophic tradition and it is clearly evident in a number of his essays like “The Religion of the Forest”, “The Message of the Forest”, “The Philosophy of Our People” among others, where he not only provides his interpretation of this philosophy but also ecocritically comments on texts like Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala*, *Kumara-Sambhava*, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, *The Winter’s Tale* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. But the most emphatic and holistic expression of his ecophilosophy is to be found in Tagore’s educational enterprise both in its theoretical construct as well as the practical execution thereof. This ecophilosophy was not the product of a poetic romanticism as Tagore succeeded in creating a stable ecology at Santiniketan. His ecophilosophy was also effective in the way he conceptualized and executed the functioning of Siksa-Satra and Sriniketan – both off-shoots of his educational enterprise. Tagore sought to create a committed, sincere and value-based education system that would empower its students to make their life and action choices that would lead to a harmonious and respectful cohabitation of the human and the non-human. At the core of Tagore’s

¹⁷ Swati Ganguly, *Tagore’s University: A History of Visva-Bharati 1921-1961* (Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2022), pp. 295-296.

¹⁸ T. J. Abram, “Ecocriticism, Ethics and the Vedic Thought” in *Indian Literature*, 51.6.242 (2007): pp. 179-186 (p. 184).

ecophilosophy was the faith that both the human and the non-human world are the manifestations of the same Supreme Power and are thus interconnected in a relationship which, when honoured, would bring fulfillment to human lives. In his words,

For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realizing our selves in it through expansion of sympathy; not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union.¹⁹

References:

- Abraham, T. J. “Ecocriticism, Ethics and the Vedic Thought” in *Indian Literature*, 51.6.242 (2007): pp. 179-186.
- Bandyopadhyay, Debarati. *Rabindranath Tagore: A Life of Intimacy with Nature* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2019).
- Cassel, Adrienne. “Walking in the Weathered World” in *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies*, ed. by Greg Garrard (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- Chanda, Rani. *Sab Hote Apan* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1984).
- Darder, Antonia. “An Eco-Pedagogy in the Pursuit of Social Justice and Peace” in *Social Justice, Peace, and Environmental Education: Transformative Standards*, ed. Julie Andrzejewski Marta P. & Baltodano Linda Symcox (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- Das, Sudhiranjan. *Amader Santiniketan* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1959).
- Ganguly, Swati. *Tagore’s University: A History of Visva-Bharati 1921-1961* (Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2022).

¹⁹ *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 2, p. 521.

- Kopnina, Helen. "Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): The turn away from 'environment' in environmental education?" in *Environmental Education Research*, 18(5) (2012), pp. 699-717.
- Lal, Ananda. *Three plays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- Misra, V. N. "Man, Nature and the Poet" in *Creativity and Environment: Selected Papers by Creative Writers presented at a National Seminar of the Sahitya Akademi, February 1985* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992), pp. 56-61.
- O'Connell, Kathleen. M. *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2012).
- Raychaudhury, Sudha Kanta. "Santiniketaner Smriti" in *Santiniketaner Shekal* ed. by S. Chattopadhyay (Kolkata: Kishalay Publication, 2019).
- Sen, Amita. *Ananda Sarbakaaje* (Kolkata: Tagore Research Institute, 1996).
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Rabindra-Rachanabali*, vols. 6, 14 & 16 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1988, 1989 & 2000).
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *The English writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. vols. 2-3. Ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994).
- Tagore, Rabindranath & Leonard K. Elmhirst. *Pioneer in Education; Essays and Exchanges between Rabindranath Tagore and Leonard K. Elmhirst* (London: Murray, 1961).

Madhurima Neogi is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Tamralipta Mahavidyalaya (affiliated to Vidyasagar University). Her areas of interest specifically include Tagore Studies, Translation Studies and Gender Studies. She has completed her M.Phil. on Rabindranath Tagore's Self-Translation from Jadavpur University and has submitted her Ph.D. thesis titled *The Educational Mission of Rabindranath Tagore to Jadavpur University*. Her doctoral thesis has been written under the eminent guidance of Professor Ananda Lal.