

Tagore and Gandhi: two philosophies of education and ‘ecosphaesthetics’

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Abstract:

While Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas K Gandhi, the two prominent ‘makers of modern India’, were mutually admiring friends with many commonalities, they also differed on many issues and nature of action. With much mutual respect, they discussed and debated those differences both privately and publicly through correspondence and journalism. One such area of their common interest and action was education and this paper takes a closer look at their philosophies and educational thought. Incidentally, two significant texts *Gitanjali* (of Tagore) and *Hind Swaraj* (of Gandhi) were written almost at the same time during the first decade of 20th century.

There were certain commonalities in their philosophies and philosophies of education. But there were differences as well. While Gandhian philosophy seemed to emphasise more on the ‘ethical’ component of life, Tagorean thought seemed to focus more on the ‘aesthetic’ element. While there seemed to be a fundamental agreement between the two in their ‘eclectic’ view of life disregarding ‘exclusive’ nationalisms, their difference in emphasis vis-a-vis the ‘ethical’ and the ‘aesthetic’, seemed to reflect in their philosophies of education as well.

The two philosophies need to be essentially captured together; the ‘ethical’ and the ‘aesthetic’ need to go hand-in-hand as they complement and complete each other; this is true in every walk of life, so also in education; such an approach could be a response to contemporary challenges. Both seemed to be quite conscious of the possibilities and limitations of ‘nature/environment’ and hence advocated an ecosophical life. Combining the philosophical thoughts of Gandhi and Tagore, the notion of ‘ecosphaesthetics’, could be derived as a comprehensive view of life and a way of life.

Key words: philosophy, education, philosophy of education, ecosophy, ethics, aesthetics and ecosphaesthetics

Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi are the two most significant figures of 20th century whose ideas and experiments cut across ‘time and space’ and hence need to be revisited again and again. Tagore’s comment on Gandhi that the latter’s practice outshines theory – is a telling one and Tagore says: “Gandhiji’s genius is essentially practical, which means his practice is immeasurably superior to his theory. We may be sure that when the scheme is actually worked out, we shall discover in it, only one more testimony to the genius of this practical sage whose deeds surpass his words”.¹ ‘Philosophy of education’ of these two most influential humans, who admired each other, respected and agreed on certain counts, yet disagreed on many other matters, is the area of exploration of this paper which adopts textual interpretation as its method. To take a look at the evolution of the word ‘philosophy’ as an area of study, Mautner says, initially in the universities, everything apart from theology, medicine and law were included in philosophy or faculty of arts; physics was considered as ‘natural philosophy’. In the 18th century, philosophy was treated as one of the subjects in the faculty of philosophy. Now the content of philosophy varies between countries and between institutions.²

Writing about the offshoots, he mentions that logic, physics and ethics were considered as the branches of philosophy from Xenocrates to Kant through several centuries and physics resulted in ‘science’; later, evolution of ‘theoretical philosophy’ included logic, epistemology and metaphysics; ‘practical philosophy’ included action, virtue and justice; in the late 18th century, areas such as ‘philosophy of law, the state, religion, language, logic, mathematics, psychology, mind, art, technology, environment etc’ emerged.³ There is an indication to the phrase ‘philosophy of education’ in Mautner’s exposition when he explains the complexities associated with the phrase ‘philosophy of...’, citing examples of philosophies of history, religion, law and mind; he also hints that philosophy could also be a second order of inquiry, examining the concepts of other subjects. Hence, it may be deduced that philosophy of education, in a sense, is the second order of inquiry, examining the concepts of education.⁴

For Radhakrishnan, the philosophy is ‘darsana’ in Indian context and terminology. He

¹ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India: National Book Trust, 2008), p. 35.

² Thomas Mautner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 466.

³ Thomas Mautner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 466.

⁴ Thomas Mautner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 467.

continues that the root word for 'darsana' is 'drs' which means 'to see'; the seeing may be perceptual observation or conceptual knowledge; it may be inspection of facts, logical inquiry or insight of soul. Darsana is not intuition even though it is connected; it is a critical exposition, logical survey or a system; it is a thought system acquired by intuitive experience and sustained by logical argument.⁵ Radhakrishnan, along with Mautner, provides a right entry point for examining Tagore and Gandhi vis-a-vis their philosophies of education.

The word 'education' originates from the Latin word 'educatum' consisting of 'E' and 'Duco', the 'E' implying movement from 'inward' to 'outward' and the 'Duco' implying a kind of progress. The Latin word 'educere' also means propulsion from internal to the external. It could be a process of developing 'inner abilities'. It could also mean a kind of a change brought about by practice.⁶ Etymologically, education implies some kind of propulsion from 'inside' to 'outside' and progress; something is inside which needs to be brought out and it progresses.

This etymological meaning of education goes well with what the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, in his book 'Democracy and Education: an introduction to the philosophy of education', observes that as learning is 'coming to know', it involves a movement from 'ignorance to wisdom, privation to fullness, defect to perfection and non-being to being' in the 'Greek way' of putting it.⁷

It so much reminds one of those lines from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (of the pre-Christian era) in Indian tradition – Asatoma Sadgamaya, Tamasoma Jyotirgamaya, Mrityorma Amritamgamaya – take me from non-being to being, darkness to light which can mean 'ignorance to wisdom' and momentariness to eternity which may stand for a shift from 'privation and defect' to 'fullness and perfection'.⁸ Between these two lines – one Greek and another Indian - the shades of meaning may differ; but one doesn't fail to recognize a similarity in the essence of their meanings. These comprehensions also elevate education to its philosophical plain.

Discussing the meaning of education Kamala Bhatia and B D Bhatia maintain that initially

⁵ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* (Vol I) (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 20.

⁶ G R Sharma, *Trends in contemporary Indian philosophy of education* (New Delhi, India. Atlantic Publishers, n.d), p. 7.

⁷ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An introduction to the philosophy of education* in Krishna Kumar (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2017), p. 355.

⁸ Krishnamurthy, Yayavaram, (2017), *Asatoma Sad Gamaya* ([www.speakingtree.in:](http://www.speakingtree.in/)) (Accessed 18 June, 2023).

children were taught necessary skills for living and gradually it also meant an attempt for more enriched social and cultural life. According to John Dewey (quoted in Bhatia and Bhatia) education is a process which has both psychological and sociological side; a child's urges and powers form the basis and provide initial point for education and later child is shaped as per the social consciousness and needs. So, Bhatia and Bhatia conclude that education is a tri-polar process involving educator, educand and social forces.⁹

This view is broadly confirmed by Ozman and Craver who say philosophy of education exists ever since humans became conscious of education as a 'distinct human activity'; even in pre-literate societies, education involved a philosophy of life; initially, education was primarily for survival, teaching skills necessary for living; but over the years, it has grown into a complex system catering to 'refined' socio-cultural life; as there are educational practices, so there are theories about it and the task is to connect theory and practice intelligently.¹⁰

According to John Dewey (quoted in Chandra and Sharma), philosophy of education is the theory addressing the 'difficulties' of contemporary social life. In his understanding, it is clearly suggested that education and society are closely connected and not independent of each other.¹¹ Dewey further says (cited in Ozman and Craver), if we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and our fellowmen, philosophy may even be defined as general theory of education.¹² This view is a seminal one in the sense that it hints at the interchangeability of philosophy and theory of education – so inseparably intertwined. Against this background, Tagorean and Gandhian philosophies of education are discussed.

⁹ Kamala Bhatia and B D Bhatia, *Theory and Principles of Education: Philosophical and Sociological Bases of Education* (Delhi: Doaba House Publication, 1986), p. 3.

¹⁰ Howard Ozmon A, and Samuel Craver M, *Philosophical Foundations of Education*. (London, UK: Merrill, Prentice-Hall International, 1999), p. 1.

¹¹ S Chandra and R K Sharma, *Philosophy of Education* (New Delhi. India. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (p) Ltd, 2007), p. 34.

¹² Howard Ozmon A, and Samuel Craver M, *Philosophical Foundations of Education*. (London, UK: Merrill, Prentice-Hall International, 1999), p. 9.

Tagore and Gandhi: Divergent Unity

Literature on Tagore and Gandhi generally compares their ideas and practices. Their commonalities have been identified and divergences have been elaborated. Their debates may be described as a kind of ‘dialectic’ even though their positions were not ‘polar opposites’ all the time, they also helped one understand their own positions in a better light. “The intellectual quality of the dialogue between Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, possesses an enduring interest.”¹³

Their philosophies, their ideas on Swaraj and the State, nationalism, science and technology, have received much attention, so also their philosophies of education. Both believed in the primacy of education, but both advocated such ideas on education, much different from the conventional model. But they were not mere theorists, but also practitioners of education; they built institutions – Tagore spending a lot of time on Shantiniketan and Gandhi deciding the destiny of Gujarat Vidya Peeth, as well as contributing much to Wardha scheme of education. Gandhi was also constantly experimenting in Tolstoy farm, Phoenix farm, Sabaramati Ashram and Wardha Ashram. Philosophically, both believed in the unity of all human beings and nature too. For Tagore it comes through his belief in Brahman as Radhakrishnan says¹⁴ and for Gandhi, this comes from Advaita, Dvaita, Anekanatavada, Buddha and Gita, as A L Basham says.¹⁵ As a result, as practitioners of their philosophy, they opposed all kinds of discrimination and exploitation; they visualised a just social order; as a result, both believed in education cultivating individual growth meeting social needs.

The hymn that was chanted in Tagore’s school was – “The God who is in fire, who is in water, who interpenetrates the whole world, who is in the herbs, who is in trees, to that God I bow again and again” which is from the Upanishads. The Vedantic Absolute as much as Tagore’s God is a ‘concrete spirit’. In Gitanjali, he says, He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones.¹⁶

¹³ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2008), pp. 1-37.

¹⁴ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. (New Delhi, India: Niyogi Books, 2015), p. 4.

¹⁵ A L Basham, *Traditional influences on the thought of Mahatma Gandhi in Debating Gandhi*, ed. Raghuramraju A (Noida, India: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi, India: Niyogi Books, 2015), p. 44.

I am advaitist and yet I can support dvaitism. The word is changing every moment and is therefore unreal, It has no permanent existence. But though it is constantly changing, it has something about it which persists and it is therefore to that extent real. I have therefore no objection to calling it real and unreal, and thus being called an anekantavadi or syadvadi.

But my syadvada is not the syadvada of the learned, it is peculiarly my own,¹⁷ says Gandhi. For him, morality is the basis of all things and truth is the ‘substance’ of all morality. So, is Gandhi suggesting that morality whose ‘substance’ is truth, is beyond reason at times? Or is he merely privileging ‘morality’ over ‘reason’ in his practical, philosophical cosmos? But here in itself, there seems to be a ‘reason’able logical argument. He did mention that he moved from truth to truth. And he certainly moved from ‘God is truth’ to ‘Truth is God’. But when he says that to see the universal and all-pervading spirit of ‘truth’ face-to-face, one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself, he in fact, is suddenly bringing ‘truth’ from the speculative metaphysical world into the real, practical, physical world.

In the initial years, Shantiniketan and Sabarmati shared many commonalities. Both Gandhi and Tagore were trying to build educational institutions outside ‘state-sponsored system in colonial world.’ Both of them emphasised the primacy of mother-tongue in teaching. Both tried to shape the schooling drawing from India’s culture and way of life. Both gave significance to students’ participation in creative and productive activities.¹⁸ Emphasis on mother tongue as the medium of instruction, was perhaps also an attempt at ‘decolonising the mind’ at the cultural level as both of them were not really interested in mere political freedom for the country. While Both of them were not against English and Englishmen per se and in that sense, they were not jingoistic nationalists and their nationalism was without hatred, they were certainly in favour of making use of native languages in education without which ‘Swaraj’ did not hold much meaning for them.

Tagore’s village school- Shiksha Satra – founded in 1924 in Sriniketan was visited by Gandhi in 1925. Its principal A William Aryanayakam, was invited by Gandhi in 1934 to head an experimental school on Gandhian lines at Wardha and it was Aryanayakam, who was commissioned by Gandhi in 1937 to be the secretary to the committee he set up to frame the Basic

¹⁷ A L Basham, ‘Traditional influences on the thought of Mahatma Gandhi’ in *Debating Gandhi*, ed. by Raghuramraju A (Noida, India: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁸ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2008), pp. 33-34.

Education scheme. In this sense too, one may notice certain ‘undercurrent’ which connected the two institutions.

When the scheme, also known as Wardha scheme, was published in Harijan in 1937 and discussed in the ensuing meeting of Indian National Congress. Tagore raised some questions. His comments centred around two features of the scheme. First, Tagore questioned the utilitarian centrality given to the productive manual work in the basic education scheme. Secondly, Tagore was uncomfortable with the idea of earmarking for rural poor a special type of education which destined them to a limited vocation.¹⁹

To Mahatma Gandhi, these questions might have been irrelevant since his object was, first, to make the schools financially viable and independent of government support and secondly, to use productive manual work as the prime means of intellectual training. Tagore did not press his points and readily conceded. “Gandhiji’s genius is essentially practical, which means his practice is immeasurably superior to his theory...we may be sure that when the scheme is actually worked out, we shall discover in it, only one more testimony to the genius of this practical sage whose deeds surpass his words”²⁰

Once Gandhi returns from South Africa in 1915, he visits Shantiniketan with his Phoenix boys. Both Gandhi and his students spend some time there. Then Gandhi starts his Sabaramati Ashram. Education has been an abiding interest for both of them. For Gandhi, education is drawing out the best from the students. His was a ‘three H’ formula - ‘head, heart and hand’. For him Hand is the entry point. Head and Heart need to be trained through hand.²¹ Gandhi was simply making a radical rupture in the philosophy of life itself. In his philosophy of education, perhaps, Ruskin, Tolstoy, Thoreau and a Karmayogi of Gita – all were coming alive. He was making a radical point. He was subverting a very ‘demeaning demerit’ of Indian education. He was subverting the very basis of ‘Padbhyam Shudro Ajaayata’ system (the birth-based hierarchical social order). Shudra was becoming central to him and all the values Shudra represented. Manual labour was becoming important to him.

¹⁹ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2008), p. 34.

²⁰ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2008), p. 35.

²¹ Anil, Sadgopal, *The Pedagogic Essence of Nai Taleem in The Living Gandhi: Lesson for Our Times* ed. by Tara Sethia and Anjana Narayan (New Delhi. India: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 168.

When he sums up Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, his key point was - physical labour is as important as intellectual labour. He was attacking the very basis of hierarchical social order which considered intellect as superior to the body. "If I were a poet, I could write poetry on the possibilities of the five fingers"²², Gandhi says. For him, it was not just craft-based education, but everything was to be taught through craft, even the philosophy. Head and heart need to be trained through hand.

Gandhi did have his sense of the aesthetic. He looked at literature and art through his strict ethical perspective. He loved music, mostly devotional music. Hence Vaishnava Janato and Raghupati Raghava Rajaram are so popular. Ekla Chalore was his favourite. Looking at the sky and moon, he could have been happy. He liked Dickens and did not like Oscar Wilde. He feels that Oscar Wilde focusses on external beauty and "art for art's sake" doesn't make much sense to him. Instead, he likes Charles Dickens both for his themes and style of writing.²³ Mulk Raj Anand revises his significant novel 'Untouchable' after meeting Gandhi on his advice. This is also an interesting episode which gives insight into Gandhian view – not only, of art but of life itself (consequently, of education too), narrated by Anand himself in his essay 'Why I write'. After writing 'Untouchable' in Europe under progressive influence, he respectfully gives its manuscript to Gandhi, seeking his opinion. Gandhi feels that the protagonist of the novel has been characterised as a 'Bloomsbury intellectual' and the writing is too verbose. In response, Anand brings it down by nearly hundred pages. As Gandhi frequently feels that art needs to serve the masses and the poor, his emphasis seems to be more on the 'ethical' than on the 'aesthetic' as evident in his dislike for Oscar Wilde.

As a contrast, Tagore grew up in a different kind of environment and under different circumstances and influences. He did not like conventional education. For him school was a prison. He was taught at home. He was more inclined to arts. (Devi Prasad, 2000).²⁴ Like Gandhi, he was

²² Anil, Sadgopal, *The Pedagogic Essence of Nai Taleem in The Living Gandhi: Lesson for Our Times* ed. by Tara Sethia and Anjana Narayan (New Delhi, India. Penguin Books. 2013), p. 167.

²³ M. K. Gandhi, *The Voice of Truth, The selected works of Mahatma Gandhi Vol VI* (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1994), pp. 284-305.

²⁴ Devi Prasad, *Rabindranath Tagore: Philosophy of Education and Painting* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2000), pp. 1-42.

also sent to London to study Gandhi became a failed lawyer. Tagore actually failed; in the sense he did not complete law. He was more inclined to arts. He could enjoy Kumarasambhava and Shakespeare. He wrote poetry. He set up the school when he was 40 in a place which was meant to be a place for meditation. Tagore started a different kind of meditation, a meditation on education, cultivating free individuals. Hence Tagore's famous song: "where the mind is without fear and the head is held high..."²⁵

Of course, even for Tagore – head, heart and hand – were to be trained equitably - mind, body and the intellect. But Tagore was essentially an aesthete, a poet, story teller, an artist, and hence, his emphasis seems to be more on mind and intellect. The curriculum included all kinds of arts – music, dance, theatre, painting, literature. The very name Vishwabharathi was semiotic with India reaching out to the world having both Bharathi (India) and Vishwa (the universe) It was also craft-based education. The institution was also concerned with rural development. Tagore and Gandhi's concerns were the same. Both of them advocated mother tongue as the medium of instruction.

But the differences were due to their difference in temperament, in their persona, in their very mental make-up. One was poet-an aesthete-an artist-a story teller-a thinker; another was a pragmatic politician, a hard-boiled idealistic realist or realistic idealist and a practical theorist. On their differences, as Gandhi himself says that they complement each other.²⁶ There was also something that was predominantly common between them – love for the nature/love for the earth. There is a need to combine Gandhian and Tagorean philosophy of education. There is a line by Gandhi at the height of their disagreements- "We complement each other". They complete each other. The dialectic between the two, creates something new, something complete. Tagore represents the aesthetic and Gandhi represents the ethical. Both of them have immeasurable love for nature in different ways.

'Nature provides enough for everybody's need, but not everybody's greed' – is a much quoted Gandhian line and Tagore spoke in terms of 'forest universities'. Both of them cherished

²⁵ Devi Prasad, *Rabindranath Tagore: Philosophy of Education and Painting* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2000), pp. 1-42.

²⁶ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India: National Book Trust, 2008), pp. 1-37.

certain kind of 'eclectic, yet rooted universalism' and were trying to bring out the best from fellow humans regardless of all barriers in harmony with all others and nature. Putting all these together, it could be called 'ecosphaesthetics' - which combines ecosophy (which may be traced back to the writings of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess whose post-graduate dissertation was on M. K. Gandhi)²⁷ and aesthetics being the philosophy of arts. The most significant challenge of 21st century is ecological which also holds in its belly issues of 'equity and peace'. Hence, 'ecosphaesthetics' is the philosophy of education for 21st century. At a time when, the world is quite concerned about the issues of climate change and global warming, ecosophical thought has been consciously integrated into the educational curriculum. If that could also be made aesthetic, ecosophy could be more effectively taught through different forms of arts such as music, theatre, dance, visual arts, literature and cinema. While a book published in 2018, has its title as 'Ecosophical Aesthetics', deriving 'ecosophy' from Gandhi and 'aesthetics' from Tagore, one may term the new age philosophy of education as 'ecosphaesthetics'.

²⁷ William Edelglass, 'Naess, Arne' in *Green Ethics and Philosophy*, ed.by Julie Newman and Paul Robbins (New Delhi, India: Sage Publications Ltd, 2011), p. 327.

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