



Tagore's School and Methodology: Classrooms Without Walls

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Abstract:

This paper argues that Rabindranath Tagore, a very practical man, developed a distinctive and successful educational methodology over the course of his work in educational systems. The paper seeks to show that Tagore drew inspiration and direction from extraordinary times, and extraordinary people of those times. The paper establishes the Tagore family's place within the ongoing Bengali Renaissance; and to Tagore's place among remarkable individuals, particularly Jagadish Chandra Bose and Patrick Geddes. The paper looks to the emergence of the poet's educational institutions from spiritual and technological viewpoints. An attempt is made to show that Tagore's educational establishments were methodologically developed, can claim to be part of his poetic legacy; and that telepresence technologies of the twenty-first century might offer good service to those establishments as they continue to evolve.

Keywords: Tagore, Visva-Bharati, Bengal Renaissance, Bose, Geddes, telepresence, education

Tagore's educational achievements gain perspective when viewed as a consequence of the Bengali Renaissance, which the Tagore family contributed to for three generations. A major aspect of the Bengali renaissance was spiritual: specifically, reconnection with the ancient Vedic and Upanishadic scriptures. The 32 years, spanning Tagore's life from 30 to 62, saw Tagore integrate his poetic and spiritual sensibilities with an evolving educational methodology. During those revolutionary years, from 1891 to 1923, Tagore, developed and implemented educational models steadily, starting with a first primary school and nursery on his family's Zamindari estate in Shilaidaha, East Bengal, in 1891. More ambitious work began at Santiniketan in 1901. Here, we see the emergence of a rural boarding school as a twentieth century educational ashram. His work in educational systems culminated in the establishment of Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan in 1921 and the incorporation into the university of the Institute for Rural Reconstruction, Sriniketan, in 1923.

The purpose of this paper is to position Tagore's educational activities in the context of some of the influences he absorbed - spiritual, scientific, political and cultural - as he developed his "Classrooms without Walls" educational method. We will particularly focus on his close family relationships and the friendships and contributions of Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose and Sir Patrick Geddes.

We further consider how Information and Communications Technologies, and particularly telepresence technologies, could be used to support the Visva-Bharati University institutions as they further evolve in the twenty first century.

Influence of Grandfather and Father

Tagore's grandfather, Dwarkanath,¹ inherited zamindari estates at the age of thirteen, became a barrister and, significantly, an outstanding Bengali entrepreneur—developing substantial business interests in zamindari estates, banking, coal-mining, steam navigation, the tea trade, indigo, salt, sugar, and opium. Dwarkanath Tagore's company managed huge estates across West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, and East Bengal (Bangladesh). Dwarkanath held large stakes in new enterprises set up to tap the rich coal seams of Bengal, run tug services between Calcutta and the mouth of the river Hooghly and transplant Chinese tea crops to the plains of Upper Assam.

¹ Kling, *Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

Dwarkanath was an extraordinarily accomplished, entrepreneurial businessman who strongly believed that India would be best served by maintaining close relations with the British Empire. As a consequence of his skills and service to the empire, Dwarkanath was awarded the freedom of the city of Edinburgh in 1845.

Perhaps strangely, Dwarkanath had also been a close friend and financial supporter of Raja Rammohan Roy,² who was a prime instigator of the Bengali Renaissance: a campaigner against idolatry and widow-burning (*sati*). He was a founder of comparative religions, who endorsed the need for modern reinterpretation of spiritual texts, such as the bible, and therefore brought new attention to India's ancient Vedas and Upanishads.³

Rabindranath Tagore, and his father, Debendranath, were heavily influenced by both of these great figures and were themselves subject to ever more radical spiritual and cultural pressures that resulted from the blossoming Bengali renaissance.

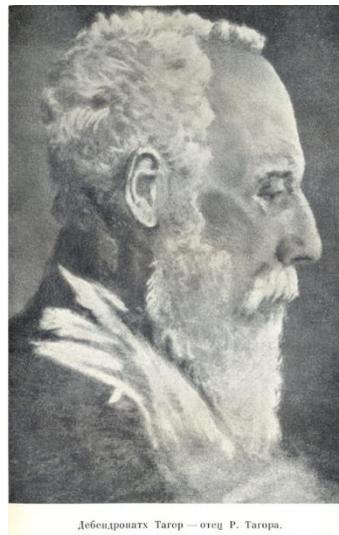


Figure 1: Dwarkanath and Debendranath Tagore;
Courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Debendranath Tagore was born in Shilaidaha in 1817. Debendranath was the eldest of three sons, all of whom started life as privileged sons of a wealthy man. As a young man, Debendranath was employed by

² Subrata Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance*, 2012 edition (Permanent Black, 2012).

³ L. Zastoupil, *Rammohun Roy and the Making of Victorian Britain*, 2010 edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Dwarkanath at the family's Union Bank. While he was there,⁴ a leaflet with the first shlokas of the Isha Upanishad was posted through his letterbox. The Isha Upanishad, teaching about the Lord, reproduced below, was of great significance to Debendranath as he started upon his own spiritual journey.

1. All this is for habitation by the Lord, whatsoever is individual universe of movement in the universal motion. By that renounced thou shouldst enjoy; lust not after any man's possession.
2. Doing verily works in this world one should wish to live a hundred years. Thus it is in thee and not otherwise than this; action cleaves not to a man.
3. Sunless are those worlds and enveloped in blind gloom whereto all they in their passing hence resort who are slayers of their souls.
4. One unmoving that is swifter than Mind, That the Gods reach not, for It progresses ever in front. That, standing, passes beyond others as they run. In That the Master of Life establishes the Waters.
5. That moves and That moves not; That is far and the same is near; That is within all this and That also is outside all this.
6. But he who sees everywhere the Self in all existences and all existences in the Self, shrinks not thereafter from aught.
7. He in whom it is the Self-Being that has become all existences that are Be-comings, for he has the perfect knowledge, how shall he be deluded, whence shall he have grief who sees everywhere oneness?
8. It is He that has gone abroad—That which is bright, bodiless, without scar of imperfection, without sinews, pure, unpierced by evil. The Seer, the Thinker, the One who becomes everywhere, the Self-existent has ordered objects perfectly according to their nature from years sempiternal.
9. Into a blind darkness they enter who follow after the Ignorance, they as if into a greater darkness who devote themselves to the Knowledge alone.
10. Other, verily, it is said, is that which comes by the Knowledge, other that which comes by the Ignorance; this is the lore we have received from the wise who revealed That to our understanding.
11. He who knows That as both in one, the Knowledge and the Ignorance, by the Ignorance crosses beyond death and by the Knowledge enjoys Immortality.
12. Into a blind darkness they enter who follow after the Non-Birth, they as if into a greater darkness who devote themselves to the Birth alone.
13. Other, verily, it is said, is that which comes by the Birth, other that which comes by the Non-Birth; this is the lore we have received from the wise who revealed That to our understanding.
14. He who knows That as both in one, the Birth and the dissolution of Birth, by the dissolution crosses beyond death and by the Birth enjoys Immortality.
15. The face of Truth is covered with a brilliant golden lid; that do thou remove,

⁴ Brian A. Hatcher, 'Father, Son and Holy Text: Rabindranath Tagore and the Upaniṣads', *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, 4.2 (2011), 119–43 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/jhs/hir022>>.

O Fosterer, for the law of the Truth, for sight.

16. O Fosterer, O sole Seer, O Ordainer, O illumining Sun, O power of the Father of creatures, marshal thy rays, draw together thy light; the Lustre which is thy most blessed form of all, that in Thee I behold. The Purusha there and there, He am I.
17. The Breath of things is an immortal Life, but of this body ashes are the end. OM! O Will, remember, that which was done remember! O Will, remember, that which was done remember.
18. O god Agni, knowing all things that are manifested, lead us by the good path to the felicity; remove from us the devious attraction of sin. To thee completest speech of submission we would dispose.⁵

Although the Isha is one of the shortest Upanishads, many consider the Isha to be the most powerful of all of the Upanishads. In 1843, Debendranath was one of the founders of the Brahmo Samaj, which was established to rekindle the spiritual approach of Raja Rammohan Roy. In 1848, he also established the spiritual path of Brahmoism.

Rabindranath worked with Aurobindo Ghosh in the days of resistance to the adverse British colonial activities in Bengal. Rabindranath was witness to a spiritual transformation that came over Ghosh as a consequence of time he spent as a political prisoner in Kolkata. And so, the English translation of the Upanishad provided above is by Sri Aurobindo.⁶

What is abundantly clear by this point is that a deep sense of Upanishadic spirituality was active in the Tagore family. Rabindranath's poetry explores the streams of oneness of all life, the play of a great spirit across the earth and through all lives, and most evocatively as he speaks of his own Jiban Debata, life lord.⁷ Before looking at Tagore's friendships, we will look at some of the other spiritual influences in Bengal at the time, firstly those of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda

Sri Ramakrishna, the most outstanding spiritual figure of 19th century Bengal, was born in 1836, three years after the death of Rammohan Roy, and thirteen years before the death of Dwarkanath Tagore. Sri Ramakrishna's message was about the synthesis of all world religions and the role they play in human life.

In 1893, seven years after the passing of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda brought the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna to the Chicago par-

⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *The Upanishads, 1st US Edition*, Us ed. edition (Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press, 1996).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ana Jelnikar, 'Hospitality and Worldliness: Tagore's Household Drama of Love and Responsibility', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 2016 <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00856401.2016.1156512>>.

liament of world religions with the words: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."⁸ Sri Ramakrishna's message of the synthesis of all world religions became a sensation at the parliament, and immediately brought the teachings to the west.

In 1894, one year after Swami Vivekananda's success in the West, the Saradeswari Ashram was opened by Gauri Ma. Residence, board and instruction were free to unmarried, married and widowed women. Village girls also came in the afternoon. Gauri Ma had been asked by Sri Ramakrishna to work for the betterment of women in India. Sri Ramakrishna wished her to work to improve their education and development, both intellectually and spiritually. Gauri Ma protested that she was not able for such a feat, but could train other women to do it. Ramakrishna replied, "You have done enough sadhana and tapasya. Now, this life, which has been purified by much austerity, must be sacrificed to the service of women, whose lives are full of suffering."⁹

In 1895 Margaret Noble, who was to become Sister Nivedita, a very close disciple of Swami Vivekananda, met the Swami for the first time in London. Sister Nivedita became a close friend of JC Bose and his wife, Ambala, – she provided support and encouragement to Bose in his scientific endeavours. Tagore said of Sister Nivedita, "In the day of his success, Jagadish gained an invaluable energiser and helper in Sister Nivedita, and in any record of his life's work her name must be given a place of honour."¹⁰

Rabindranath and the Nest

Rabindranath's problems with schooling are well documented,¹¹ and he was essentially home-schooled, mostly by his brother Jyotirindranath. Although Jyotirindranath was Rabindranath's elder brother by 12 years, Jyotirindranath was married to a girl, Kadambari, who was one year older than Rabindranath and who joined the Tagore household in 1869, as a member of the family when she was nine. As they grew up together, Tagore

⁸ McRae, 'Oriental Verities on the American Frontier: The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions and the Thought of Masao Abe on JSTOR'.

⁹ Sivatattvananda, *Gauri Ma, a Monastic Disciple of Sri Ramakrishna*, 1st ed edition (Mothers Trust/Mothers Place, 1994), p. 29.

¹⁰ Swami Sarvabhutananda, 'Nivedita of India - Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture', p. 72 <<https://www.scribd.com/document/99589785/Nivedita-of-India-Ramakrishna-Mission-Institute-of-Culture>>

¹¹ Rabindranath Tagore and Uma Das Gupta, *My Life in My Words* (S.l.: Penguin Books India, 2010), pp. 63-74.

spent a great deal of time with Kadambari, and she, in turn exerted a strong influence upon him, reading his poetry and commenting upon it. They seem to have been especially close. In 1883, Rabindranath was married; and in 1884 tragedy struck the extended Tagore family when Kadambari committed suicide by taking poison.

Seven years later, in 1891, Rabindranath became an estate landlord at Shilaidaha, where he began to work in earnest as zamindar, social innovator and rural school tutor. In 1898, Tagore moved his own family to Shilaidaha. In 1901 Tagore published his novella, *Nashta Nirh, The Broken Nest*, (which seems to address some of the family's tragedy).¹² In the same year Tagore moved his new family to Santiniketan, the abode of peace, (founded by Debendranath), where he could write, build a better nest, and allow his educational vision to properly flourish.

Shortly after the family arrival in Santiniketan, his wife died in 1902, his favourite pupil died in 1903, and one of his daughters died in 1904. In January of 1905 Debendranath, died; and in July of the same year, the British government partitioned Bengal.

JC Bose

We know that Jogadish Chandra (J.C.) Bose, was, along with Rabindranath, a member of the Brahma Samaj, and that he visited Tagore regularly while Tagore was in Shilaidaha in the 1890s.¹³ We also know that Bose encouraged Tagore in writing short stories, and that Tagore strove to have new materials, for each visit by Bose. The 1890s were a fertile period in Tagore's writing career: streams exploring his new sense of freedom and others exploring his uneasiness with claustrophobic situations begin to emerge in his story-telling. It is estimated that approximately 25% of *Gitanjali* was produced in Shilaidaha, as well as important short stories, such as *Kabuliwallah*, and some important plays and novellas. We also know that Tagore recognised greatness in Bose.

During this same time, Bose started to produce research results of the highest distinction. In 1895 he demonstrated the use of microwaves in Calcutta Town Hall, passing them through three walls to ring a bell and ignite gunpowder, saying, "The invisible light can easily pass through brick walls, buildings etc. Therefore, messages can be transmitted by means of it without the mediation of wires".¹⁴ By using microwaves, in 1895, Bose had

¹² Rabindranath Tagore, *The Broken Nest*, trans. by Mary M. Lago and Supriya Bari (Madras: Asia Book Corp of Amer, 1983).

¹³ Parul Chakrabarti, Indrani Bose and Kabita Mandal, 'Convener's Note' (presented at the Tagore, Bose and Mahalanobis: Confluence of Minds, Sir J.C. Bose Trust, 2013), pp. 1-3.

¹⁴ Pragnan Chakravorty, 'History of Wireless', *Scribd* <<https://www.scribd.com/document/63425706/History-of-Wireless>>.

demonstrated radio transmission. In 1896, Bose successfully sent signals three miles, between two Calcutta colleges. In 1899, Bose presented a paper at the Royal Society in London, on an improved signal reception device for radio-wave transmission. This solution incorporated what was in actual fact the world's first semi-conductor diode.

It was still two years before Marconi demonstrated a successful transatlantic signal transmission, in late 1901.¹⁵ Marconi's success in receiving the transmission was only possible because he used the detector that Bose had described in London. Of this receptor, Marconi reported that he had received word of it from the Italian Navy – this was denied. Although Marconi later recorded a debt of gratitude to Bose for his work in this area,¹⁶ it is now abundantly clear that J.C. Bose should, at least, have been a co-recipient of the 1909 Nobel Prize for Physics that went to Marconi for his work on radio-wave message transmissions.¹⁷

But, even as these issues were ongoing, Bose had shifted his attention from physics to life forms. Bose proceeded to invent the high-magnification crescograph in botany:¹⁸ a device which could magnify plant activity between 1000- and 10,000-fold (where the order of the day beforehand was 10- to 20-fold). Bose then went on to show plants growing, that plants and animals share a closely related nervous system, react to pain, show fear, and happiness. He discovered the importance of electrical impulses in plants and that tree-sap is propagated throughout the tree by a mechanism similar in nature to the animal heart. Bose showed that in being in control of their responses to the environment, plants have a nervous system, a form of intelligence and a capacity for learning.¹⁹ This work is now considered the foundational work of neurobiology: the study of the brain and its nervous systems. In his experiments with chloroform, Bose even noticed aspects of living behaviour in metals. All of his work in this area explored the close similarities in life across biological kingdoms.

¹⁵ Amita Das, 'Jagadish Chandra Bose and Rabindranath Tagore: An Enduring Friendship', *Acharya J.C. Bose: Life, Vision and Legacy*, 1 (2010), 46–49.

¹⁶ Varun Aggarwal, 'Jagadish Chandra Bose: The Real Inventor of Marconi's Wireless Receiver', *ResearchGate* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255425775_Jagadish_Chandra_Bose_The_Real_Inventor_of_Marconi's_Wireless_Receiver> [accessed 31 August 2016].

¹⁷ D. L. Sengupta, T. K. Sarkar and D. Sen, 'Centennial of the Semiconductor Diode Detector', *ResearchGate*, 86.1 (1998), 235–43 <<https://doi.org/10.1109/5.658775>>.

¹⁸ Jagadis Chunder Bose and Guruprasanna Das, 'Researches on Growth and Movement in Plants by Means of the High Magnification Crescograph', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences*, 90.631 (1919), 364–400 <<https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.1919.0001>>.

¹⁹ V. A. Shepherd, 'At the Roots of Plant Neurobiology', in *Plant Electrophysiology*, ed. by Alexander G. Volkov (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2012), pp. 3–43 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-29119-7_1>.

Their deep and lifelong friendship saw Tagore request Bose's help to build a "mechanical laboratory" at Visva-Bharati University,²⁰ which was only unsuccessful because a suitably qualified teacher could not be found.

Patrick Geddes

Patrick Geddes lectured on zoology at Edinburgh University, was Professor of Botany in Dundee, Professor of Sociology and Civics in Bombay, Director of Scots and Indian Colleges at Montpellier University, and president of the institutes of sociology in London and Edinburgh. He was a social Darwinist, who adopted the teaching of Herbert Spencer that parallels could be drawn between a society and an animal formed of living cells.²¹ Geddes, in contradistinction with Darwin and Spencer, also believed that natural selection by survival of the fittest, or competition, is not a complete picture because it overlooks the place of co-operation in evolution.

In 1900, Patrick Geddes met Swami Vivekananda in Chicago, and then, later the same year, in Paris. Geddes, as he developed his own notions of civic sympathy and urban planning, had an immediate fascination with the Swami. And again, Sister Nivedita made a very close connection with Geddes and his wife, drawing from Geddes's work on Indian cities for her own writings.

Geddes, as a pioneer in urban planning, proposed that a sense of civic sympathy could be developed by use of the 'outlook tower' (fig. 2), which allowed people to watch the workings of a city as the workings of an extended social being. His tower operated across five floors: the top floor, which housed a *camera obscura*, made it possible to focus on the local vicinity. When the visitor was finished here, she would descend one floor to the next, where she would see an exhibition that focused on the city; then, descending to the next one down, the country, and so on. As one descended through the floors, each exhibition space expanded one's reality. By the time one reached the bottom floor of the tower, one was thinking about the interconnectedness that makes the world what it is.

²⁰ Das.

²¹ Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics or the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* (Kessinger Publishing, 2010).

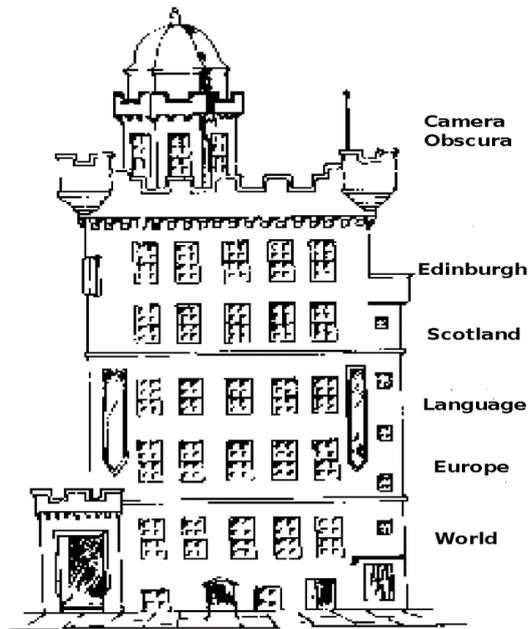


Figure 2: Outlook Tower - Observing Societal Life;
image adapted from Geddes' "Outlook Tower"²²

Geddes sought to enable connected societies, and therefore to encourage the development of healthy, connected individuals.

It was noted earlier that Sir Patrick Geddes met Swami Vivekananda in Chicago in 1900 and became friendly with Sister Nivedita.²³ It is interesting to speculate that what he called his “three doves”: sympathy, synthesis and synergy, may have been a response to the Swami’s message.

Geddes eventually moved to India in 1914, and lived there between his several journeys over a period of nine years performing surveys for tens of Indian cities²⁴. While he was in India, he became friendly with Bose, being so taken with Bose that he wrote his biography.²⁵ In 1917, he met Tagore, and a long correspondence arose between the two on suitable plans for

²² Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution: An Introduction to the Town Planning Movement and to the Study of Civics* (London: Williams, 1915) <<http://archive.org/details/citiesinevolutio00gedduoft>> (Image adapted from "Outlook Tower", P. 324).

²³ Walter Stephen, *Think Global, Act Local: The Life and Legacy of Patrick Geddes* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2004).

²⁴ Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, *Patrick Geddes in India*, First Edition edition (Lund Humphries, 1947).

²⁵ Patrick Geddes, *The Life and Work of Sir Jagadis C. Bose* (Kessinger Publishing, 2007).

Tagore's institutions.²⁶ Although Geddes was not able to work directly with Tagore, his son Arthur provided on-site assistance at Santiniketan.

Emergence of Tagore's Educational Methodology

The Bose-Tagore-Geddes inter-relationships can be considered as one constellation of the working associations in Tagore's life: with Bose, a man who was determined to discover the details of life in the small scale; Tagore himself, the poet of humanity in a spiritual world; and Geddes, a man who worked on issues of the individual in organised society, focusing upon aspects of life in the large scale. The three together and individually, nurtured sympathy for life and for its need to grow and flourish that was practical and at the same time spiritual in nature. Just as each of these scientists was appreciated by Tagore, both of them held Tagore's poetic methodology in high esteem.

Alongside these inter-relationships ran extraordinary times. Briefly listed here are those that led up to and connected with the establishment of Visva-Bharati University:²⁷

- The first British partition of Bengal, 1905, and Tagore's establishment, along with Aurobindo Ghosh, and others of the Bengal National College.
- The Swadeshi movement (1905-1911) ran throughout Bengal and then India where new businesses in cotton, steel, silk, iron, pharmaceutical, chemical industries were established, and boycotts of British goods began.
- Tagore's contribution to the National Council for Education in 1906 as part of resistance to partition of Bengal. The council sought for literary, scientific and technical education to be brought under Indian national control.
- Aurobindo Ghosh became the first principal of the Bengal National College. Also emergent at the time were the Bengal National School, and Bengal Technical Institute.
- First British partition was overturned in 1911.
- Tagore Receives Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913.

²⁶ *A Meeting of Two Minds: Geddes Tagore Letters*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, 3rd Revised edition (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2008).

²⁷ Uma Das Gupta, *Science and Modern India: An Institutional History, c.1784-1947: Project of History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization, Volume XV, Part 4: Volume XV Part 4*, 1 edition (Pearson, 2010).

- Outbreak of World War 1 in 1914.
- Mohandas Gandhi comes to India in 1915.
- The "Institute for Rural Reconstruction" is begun along with agricultural economist Leonard Elmhirst in 1921. This institution eventually becomes Sriniketan.
- Visva Bharati University is established at Santiniketan in 1923. Tagore introduces his University, as a meeting-place of the East and West.

Tagore's educational work was in response to his historical times. The educational achievements are with us as the result of his successful, poetic and scientific educational methodology. It is worth reconsidering some of the key points of his methodology. On beginning pedagogical experiments:

I merely started with this one simple idea, that education should never be dissociated from life. I had no experience of teaching, no special gift for organisation; and therefore I had no plan which I could put before the public in order to win their confidence. I had not their power to anticipate what line my work was going to take. I began anyhow. All that I could do was to offer to the five little boys who were my students my company. I talked and sang to them, played with them, recited to them our epics, improvised stories specially given to them by evening, took them on excursions into neighbouring villages. It was an incessant lesson to me, and the institution grew with the growth of my own mind and life...²⁸

On trying to avoid stultifying methods:

My first idea was to emancipate children's minds from the dead grip of a mechanical method and a narrow purpose. This idea has gone on developing itself, comprehending all different branches of life's activities from Arts to Agriculture. Now it has come to a period, when we are fully aware of the absolute necessity of widening, across all barriers, the human sympathies of our students, - thus leading them to the fulfilment of their Education. This stage we have reached, as I have said, not through planning out my system, but by an inner life growth in which the subconscious has ever been bursting up with the conscious plans.²⁹

On a spiritual basis for a world-accepting University:

Now the problem before us is of one single country, which is the earth, where the races as individuals must find both their freedom of self-expression and their bond of federation. Mankind must realise a unity, wider in range, deeper in sentiment, stronger in power than ever before. Now that the problem is large, we have to solve it on a bigger scale, to realise the

²⁸ Fraser, p. 63.

²⁹ Fraser, p. 64.

God in man by a larger faith and to build the temple of our faith on a sure and world-wide basis.³⁰

On his assessment of Visva-Bharati as one of the pre-eminent universities of the world:

What is it that we can expect from this ashram when we have come – the mantra *'yatra visvam bhavati ekanidam'*: 'Where the whole world meets in one nest.' Wherever we go, we see man within his racial limits and not as part of humanity. Let our ashram be the one place in the world where we can mingle without the differences in religion, language and race. Surely that *must* be the way forward to the new age.³¹

And, in his final fervent appeal to Ghandi, that he should take Visva-Bharati under his protection, saying:

Visva-Bharati is like a vessel which is carrying the cargo of my life's best treasure, and I hope it may claim special care from my countrymen for its preservation.³²

Modern Possibilities for Pursuing Classrooms without Walls

It seems important to mention that a great deal of the theory of 'vitalism' (that there is a life force separate from biochemical and physical components), that was so persuasive to Tagore, Bose and Geddes, has been heavily critiqued over the decades of the late 19th and 20th centuries.^{33,34,35} And yet, in the twenty-first century we start to see interest in Bose's work again.³⁶ And there have been further scientific and philosophical speculations in the 21st century suggesting that we need to take an experimental attitude to gaps in Darwin's theories and to enframe new theories of mind,³⁷ life, consciousness³⁸ and our relationship with the cosmos.³⁹

³⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Creative Unity. An Eastern University* P. 170 (Rupa, 2002).

³¹ Tagore and Das Gupta. p. 199.

³² Rabindranath Tagore, Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 517.

³³ Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation* (Hackett Publishing Company, 1979).

³⁴ Alexander Rosenberg, *Darwinian Reductionism: Or, How to Stop Worrying and Love Molecular Biology* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³⁵ D. C Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*, 2013.

³⁶ Shepherd. pp. 3–43

³⁷ Thomas Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', *The Philosophical Review*, 83.4 (1974), 435–50 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914>>.

³⁸ John R Searle, D. C Dennett and David John Chalmers, *The Mystery of Consciousness* (London: Granta Books, 1998).

³⁹ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (New York: OUP USA, 2012).

A great deal of this new work is preliminary, and as such provides an excellent basis for testing hypotheses against phenomenological reality. This paper will not attempt to explore the whole current state of philosophical and neuro-scientific literature on these matters but will consider provocative speculations of the philosopher, Thomas Nagel,⁴⁰ which range across neuroscience, cognitive science and philosophy of mind, and cover such questions as pansychism—the possibility that everything in the universe has mental properties, whether or not they have living properties. Interestingly and controversially, recent work of Nagel suggests the possibility that life evolves simultaneously with mind in the cosmos, and that as life evolves, phenomenological values are constructed and pursued in the evolutionary process by an as-yet unknown means. There is some synergy here with Geddes's idea of the importance of co-operation in the evolutionary process.

Such work (speculations that universal objects, life and mind are evolving together) is highlighted to show that the Upanishadic ideas of Tagore's University are not wholly foreign to modern, scientific thought. Putting aside the settlement of such issues, if we adopt an open-mind to the questions that arise from such issues, and just aim to remain true to Tagore's practical, educational aims for his classrooms without walls, then there are ways in which it will be possible to pursue both the practical and the spiritual path of development at the University of Visva-Bharati, particularly if the University continues its focus on the highest ideals of practicality, sympathy, oneness and knowledge-sharing.

Telepresence can be used to bring places that are far apart together, but it can also instil a sense of being connected.⁴¹ Such technology could be used throughout the faculties and institutes of Visva-Bharati University (such as Sanghit Bhavan, Kala Bhavan, Patha Bhavan and Sriniketan) to allow direct access and communication with their inner workings.

A first thought would be to adapt Geddes's ideas of Outlook Towers, one for each aspect of the University, to connect all faculties of Visva-Bharati: with all others, with their nearby environment, and with companion faculties that are further afield. For example, we might imagine setting up such Outlook Towers at Santiniketan and Sriniketan (fig.3 and fig.4).

And yet, if we take heed of a realisation that seems to have occurred to Geddes over the course of his correspondence with Tagore, we see Geddes move beyond his outlook tower lookouts on the world towards a more spiritual understanding. This change in Geddes is clearly documented in many of the letters of their correspondence,⁴² and is most markedly noted in the

⁴⁰ Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 1 edition (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴¹ Thomas B. Kane, 'Using Cognitive Tunnels in a New Approach to Building Social Elevators in the Information Society', *Informatica*, 38.3 (2014) <<http://www.informatica.si/index.php/informatica/article/view/707>> .

⁴² Fraser.

letter from Geddes of October 1928, in the passage: "We have thus to get beyond our Outlook Tower, telescope, botanic gardens and geologic, historic chateaus and towards fuller utilisation of vital and spiritual outlook, and constructive and creative expression, such as yours."⁴³

And, therefore, this leads us to consider what Tagore was truly working towards in establishing a world-nest (fig. 5): a place where people can mingle without the constrictions of religion, language and race. For successful educational mingling in a world-nest institution, there has to be a sufficient space for all members; camaraderie between all participants; a secure foundation (provided, firstly by the tree and then by its physical nest); a nurturing space within the nest; opportunities for internal relationships to blossom, opportunities for receiving guests, for flying out to meet the world, and for returning home with gifts. All of these activities being supported so that the best of what India has to offer can be offered, and the best of what the world has to offer can be received.

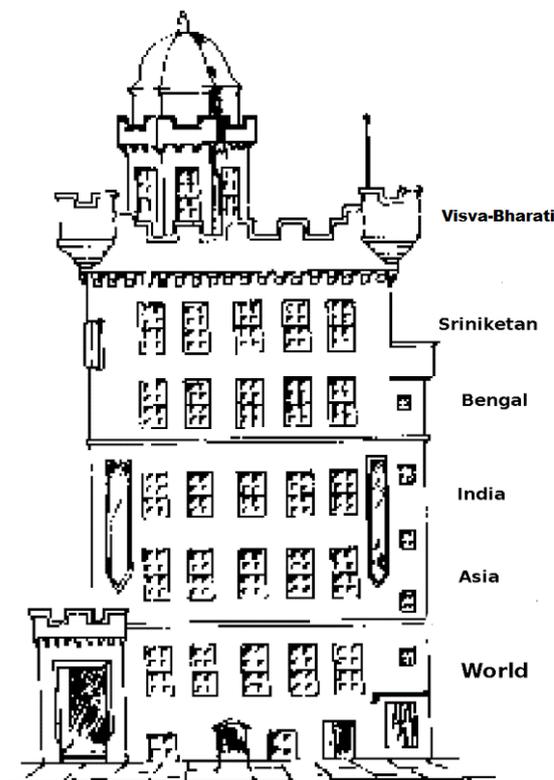


Figure 3: Tower 1 at Visva-Bharati;

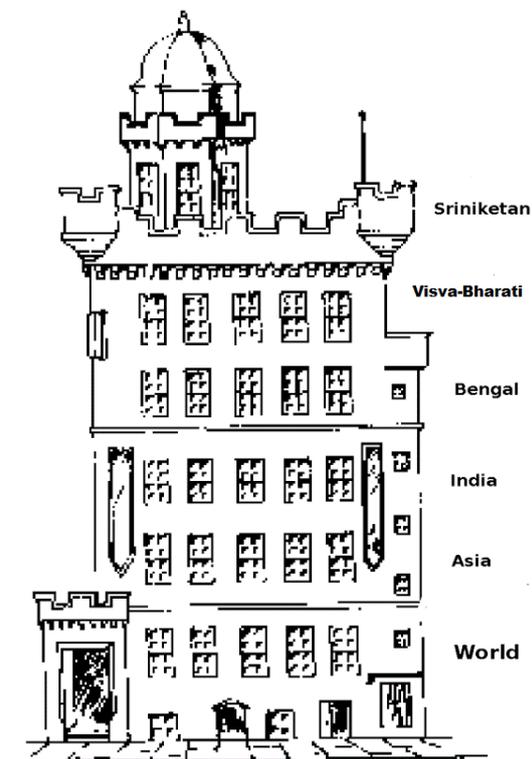


Figure 4: Tower 2 at Sriniketan

Images adapted from Geddes, "Outlook Tower", p. 324.

⁴³ Fraser. (To appear, 4th Edition).

Telepresence creates an intimate communication between contributing spaces. And, if the spaces are activity-rich (such as with musical performance, or drama; fig.5), then a real sense of bringing places and people together can be achieved. This kind of work, of bridging the distance (cognitive, spatial and temporal) between places, aligns with Tagore's educational methodology rather more so than the Outlook Tower approach of observing people and their activities at a distance.



Figure 5: Musical Masterclass and 5 Groups Enjoyed
Photos by Thomas Kane

Telepresence, opening doors to dialogues across safe spaces could be of tremendous value to Visva-Bharati University as it further pursues its own place as the world-nest university, with the important proviso that telepresence is employed only as an enabling technology in service to the values and goals of Rabindranath's cherished nest.

Conclusion

Rabindranath lived in, involved himself in, and contributed greatly to, extraordinary times. His personal experiences of education, his poetic sensibility and his ability to apply novelty within strict educational forms allowed him to pioneer in his educational work at Santiniketan. This paper has explored some of the spiritual influences upon Rabindranath's educa-

tional work, as well as the particular relationships with J.C. Bose and Patrick Geddes, all of which contributed to Tagore's educational endeavours.

One of his greatest achievements is undoubtedly Visva-Bharati, the 'World-Nest', University. This paper has suggested that a form of telepresence, a bridging form, in service to the world-nest aspects of the University, would be an excellent way of pushing Tagore's methodology anew in the twenty-first century.

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