

## **Rabindranath Tagore's Journey as an Educator: Critical Perspectives on His Poetics and Praxis**

Mohammad A. Quayum (Ed.)

*Rabindranath Tagore's Journey as an Educator: Critical Perspectives on His Poetics and Praxis*  
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As I sat to write this review, my mind played a trick, and I logged on to my ChatGPT account. I wrote, “tell me something about Rabindranath Tagore,” and within 10 seconds, it came up with certain basic information, identifying Tagore as a poet, philosopher, polymath and a great reformer of education. I did so to reflect on the unprecedented challenges and opportunities education as a cultural, social, political and economic system is experiencing in the post-post-modern globalised societies worldwide. And why, if there is a reason, should we return to Tagore, who, one may argue, was an “accidental” educationalist, having been unsuccessful in earning any formal degrees from colonial India or imperial Britain, but who ended up establishing and administering not only a number of community schools but also three full-fledged academic institutions: Santiniketan (1901), Visva-Bharati (1921) and Sriniketan (1922). This question is at the heart of the book *Rabindranath Tagore's Journey as an Educator: Critical Perspectives on His Poetics and Praxis*, edited by eminent scholar and a Tagorean erudite, Professor Mohammad A. Quayum, and the answers, drawn from multiple intellectual, cultural and geographical perspectives and collated in this book, will convincereaders that there probably was no other time in human history than now when Tagore's philosophy of education would help piece together some key jigsaws of the time and space we inhabit.

The “journey” metaphor runs through the collection divided into two parts, “Tagore versus Selected Modern Educationists” (Part I) and “Tagore's Educational Ideas and Experiments: Diverse Perspectives” (Part II). The fourteen chapters comprising these two parts (4 in Part I and 10 in Part II) individually and collectively take textual, temporal, spatial and intercultural journeys into the “poetics” and “praxis” of Tagore to grapple with questions about contemporary education, environment and the world. The editor's “Introduction” comprehensively and succinctly lays the colonial context in which Tagore, a poet and philosopher, turned into a critique of the regimented and profit-oriented education system of his time and developed a “reverse” (p. 4) model in which, to quote from the introduction, “students would enjoy freedom, teachers would be caring and benevolent, the curriculum and pedagogy would underscore the creativity and imagination of students and the overall objective of education would focus not just on obtaining a good living but

also on living well and in harmony with ‘all of existence’” (p. 4-5). Clearly, Tagore had a vision of education and a concrete plan to execute it, which becomes evident as we flip through the pages of this well-structured and critically rich book.

The four chapters in Part I carefully situate Tagore’s poetics and praxis of education in relation to some of the other leading educationists of the modern era, East and West. In “Rabindranath Tagore and Jean-Jacques Rousseau as Educational Philosophers,” Narasingha P. Sil sets the book’s broad canvas with an apt comparison between Tagore and the 18th-century Genevan philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Sil rightly suggests that although Tagore and Rousseau are not generally considered as “educational theorists or philosophers” (p. 33), both were, in fact, intellectually and practically involved in the philosophy of education. In the chapter “Tagore and Morris: Education for Utopia,” Christine Marsh engages in a comparative analysis of the educational ideals of Tagore and the influential Victorian socialist thinker and artist William Morris (1834-1896). What Marsh calls “education for utopia” (p. 69) is a clarion call to return to empathetic visionaries like Tagore and Morris so that the world and its environment could still be salvaged from being reduced to a complete dystopia. Goutam Ghosal, in his chapter “Tagore and Sri Aurobindo: Poetic Deliberations of Two Integral Theories of Education,” investigates the eastern philosophical ideas of Tagore and Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), explaining how these two Bengali Renaissance geniuses were much ahead of their time in defining education as a lifelong holistic pursuit vis-à-vis the fragmented, certificate-oriented formal education policy introduced by the British colonial administration. The book’s first part ends with a fascinating comparison between Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) in the chapter “Tagore and Rokeya: Autodidacts as Educational Pioneers” by Mohammad A. Quayum. Fundamentally, Tagore had a more shared experience with Rokeya than those discussed in the previous chapters, simply because, as Quayum cogently argues, they both ran and administered their educational institutions in the same city, i.e. British Calcutta, around the same time and amidst many similar challenges, although Rokeya’s was made far worse because of her gender and widowhood in an intrinsically patriarchal society.

The chapters in the second part critically examine Tagore’s approach to education, its novelty and its relevance to the present time. In the first chapter of this part (chapter 5), “Education for Tomorrow: A Vision of Rabindranath Tagore,” Quayum, in analysing Tagore’s vision on which his educational institutions were founded, makes a compelling case that each of his ideals – namely, learners’ freedom, nurturing human’s connection with the natural world and cultivating an imaginative mind in children – is as, if not more, relevant now than they were during Tagore’s time. In chapter 6, “Tagore’s Educational Philosophy: Entwined Theory and Practice,” Debarati Bandyopadhyay interrogates some of the sources of Tagore’s educational vision, while in chapter 7, “Rabindranath Tagore’s Ecology of Education: From Ideation to Implementation,” Shamsad Mortuza persuasively argues how Tagore’s holistic educational outlook blending the eastern spiritual philosophy and the western technological culture makes him one of the most sought after educationalist in the present era. In “Rabindranath Tagore and the Idea of a Green University,” Md Rezaul Haque draws a parallel between Tagore’s understanding of “green university” and its contemporary neoliberal version, suggesting that while for Tagore, “green” was an inherent teaching method for nourishment, healing and intellectual growth, the current experts view it from a profit-making perspective, bereft of the Tagorean elements of compassion, fellowship and empathy.

In chapter 9, “Never a Schoolboy of the West,” Anindya Bhattacharya provides a rigorous critique of the contemporary outcome-based higher education in India, resulting in the nation’s

political and cultural debacle and suggests that the best way to redress this decline is to return to Tagore's "pedagogy of affect" (p. 207) and his model of inclusive and wholesome education. In chapter 10, "Towards the Symbol of a Missing Fullness," Ana Jelnikar taps into the "travel" metaphor to explore the integral and continuous connections between Tagore as a "purposeful traveller" (p. 221) and his vision of a borderless, worldcentric education. In the next chapter, "Of Broken Umbrellas and Winged Steeds," Dipankar Roy delves into Tagore's vision of children's literature and children's education by exploring how he used his writings for children not only to satirise the adult world but also to restore the world of imagination for children that was being ruthlessly erased by the colonial educational system. In chapter 12, "Music's Spring Breezes Blew Through the Heart of the Land," Mathew Pritchard examines the place of music in Tagore's educational ideal and how it helps to make us better human beings by using our internal emotional "surplus" (p. 253), which is inherent in every human being but often suppressed by the hostile philistine culture around us. In the penultimate chapter of the book, "Never not an Educator," veteran Tagore critic William Radice argues how Tagore was an educator in everything he did or wrote, which, unfortunately, has turned him into a cult figure. He validates his claim by referring to Tagore's novel *Yogayog* (1929) and his play *Muktadhara* (1922). Finally, in "Educational Takeaways from Tagore's drama *Achalayatan*," Canadian Tagore scholar Kathleen M. O'Connell probes Tagore's play *Achalayatan* (1912) to show the playwright's transition from the state of nationalist orthodoxy to one of global inclusivity, and how that impacted his educational philosophy by bringing it closer to nature and the human spirit and untangling it from the bonds of the material world.

In this testing time of ours, when no centres can hold ground, it is commendable that this ambitious book presents a systematic appraisal of Tagore's educational principles and undertakings by some of the leading international critics in the field. Readers can choose individual chapters based on their interests and intellectual persuasion, although the book demands to be read in its eternity. Notwithstanding some repetitions about Tagore's life and works, this book, edited by an experienced Tagorean, is an invaluable contribution to the philosophy and practice of education in general and that of Tagore in particular. I recommend the book wholeheartedly to anyone interested in Tagore studies, cultural studies, South Asian studies, sociology of education, and colonial and postcolonial studies.

#### REFERENCES

*Rabindranath Tagore's Journey as an Educator: Critical Perspectives on His Poetics and Praxis.* (2022). London, New York: Routledge (Taylor and Francis).