

“Creative Resistance”

Establishing a World-Minded Indian University in Colonial British India

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1 Introduction

University is there to offer us opportunity for working together in a common pursuit of truth, sharing together our common intellectual heritage, to enable us to realize that artists in all parts of the world have created forms of beauty, scientists discovered secrets of the material universe, philosophers solved the problems of existence, saints made spiritual truths organic in their lives, not merely for some particular race to which they belonged, but for all mankind. When we understand this truth in a disinterested spirit, it teaches us to respect all the differences in man that are real, yet remain conscious of our oneness, and to know that perfection of unity is not in uniformity, but in harmony. (Tagore, 1934, p. 5)

The above quote shares a vision of global higher education and learning during colonial British India by one of the architects of modern India, Rabindranath Tagore. Once we understand the context of this conceptualization by Tagore, we realize that it was quite a radical conceptualization to “decolonize” the aims and objectives of higher education during his times. This chapter will, therefore, first discuss the context of Indian higher education during colonial British India, the vestiges of which are still predominant within the mainstream system. Thereafter, this chapter will shed light on Rabindranath Tagore’s conceptualization and establishment of a world-minded Indian University for intercultural understanding, community development, environmental sustainability and global peace within the British colonial context in India.

Drawing on archival research at Visva-Bharati University and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, this chapter argues that, studying the “creative resistance” (Darts, 2004) expressed by school and college drop-out Nobel laureate and educational reformer, Rabindranath Tagore, could hold the key for understanding some of the deeply-rooted educational problems within the South Asian context, even in contemporary times. Resistance theorizing

in education emerged in the 1970s and 1980s within the North American and European contexts with the works of Paulo Freire (1970), Stuart Hall (1976), Paul Willis (1981), Henry Giroux (1983) and McLaren (1989). While defining “Creative resistance” Darts (2004, pp. 317–318) writes:

To be of genuine pedagogical value, resistance must be re-envisioned as a generative site of consciousness raising, a location where students and teachers together are able to critically reflect upon and effectively challenge repressive practices and dominant structures that reinforce the inequities of the status quo. *Resistance thus conceived becomes both disruptive and creative*, a site of thoughtful opposition and a place for reflective inquiry and meaningful engagement. (emphasis added)

Hence, it would be critical to study the writings and life’s work of indigenous intellectuals and education reformers from the Global South to form a deeper understanding of some of the problems of the mainstream education systems in these regions, where the colonial institutional structures (including educational institutions) with vested interests of maintaining the indigenous inequities of the status quo still dominate even after achieving political freedom from colonial rule. This engagement with the creative resistance offered by intellectuals and educational reformers from the Global South, such as Rabindranath Tagore would be, therefore, critical to achieve the sustainable development goals. These intellectuals conceptualized and sought to offer creative alternatives to counter the homogenizing colonial “factory-model” (Tagore, 1906) of schools and universities as “retailers of knowledge” (Jayaram, 2007), which were designed to further the interest of colonial economic development. In his 1906 essay *The Problem of Education*, Tagore discussed at length the problem of mechanization of the teaching and learning process in “factory-model” of schools to create assembly-line factory workers and professionals to meet the needs of the colonial political economy. He offered some of the sharpest critique of the colonial “factory-model” of schools. Tagore (1906, p. 67) wrote:

What we now call a school in this country is really a factory, and the teachers are part of it. At half-past ten in the morning the factory opens with the ringing of a bell; then as the teachers start talking, the machines start working. The teachers stop talking at four in the afternoon when the factory closes, and the pupils then go home carrying with them a few pages of machine-made learning. Later, this learning is tested at examinations and labelled.

One advantage of a factory is that it can make goods exactly to order. Moreover, the goods are easy to label, because there is not much difference between what the different machines turn out. But there is a good deal of difference between one man and another, and even between what the same man is on different days. We can never get from machines what we can get from human beings.

It is evident from Tagore’s description above that the public schools that were designed like factories during the colonial times as a response to the first industrial revolution in the Global North, was also exported to the colonies of the Global South. This created a disastrous effect particularly in the Global South where “the child’s life is subjected to the education factory, lifeless, colourless, dissociated from the context” (Dasgupta, 2009, p. 108) as sharply critiqued by Tagore in one of his talks to the teachers in his own school.

This process of mechanization of education also affected the modern higher education systems established in the Global South during these colonial times. As Jayaram (2007) analyzes at length, the modern higher education system emerged in the mid-1800s in India as “retailers of knowledge” created in the Global North dissociated from the context of the Global South. The sole purpose of these higher educational institutions at the times of establishment was to sell knowledge created in the Global North and to test the acquisition of this decontextualized knowledge for the purpose of colonial governance, as the freedom movement within the Indian context began gaining momentum and it became increasingly unsafe to depute governors from London.

The following section of this chapter will further discuss how the universities as “retailers of knowledge” emerged during the mid-nineteenth century in India.

2 Modern Indian Higher Education as “Retailer of Knowledge”

The modern Indian higher education system emerged within the colonial British Indian context. Three testing centers were first set-up in colonial Calcutta, Madras and Bombay in the mid-nineteenth century to administer tests for Indian Civil Services (ICS) Examinations for recruitment in colonial government jobs. These testing centers eventually grew to be the Calcutta University, Madras University and Bombay University, modelled after the University College of London with several affiliated colleges under each of these universities. Apart from training future civil servants for colonial government jobs, these universities also offered courses for training various professionals, such as lawyers, doctors, teachers etc. The purpose was to meet the needs of the colonial

political economy to educate and train a class of local professionals for various jobs.

Those with curious minds eager for research enquiry would generally go abroad for scientific research studies and higher education. Scientific societies for the cultivation of scientific temperament, thinking and education were becoming quite prevalent during colonial British India and there was a spate of science journals published in local language in colonial Calcutta. However, due to lack of government funding support and discriminatory policies “The environment was certainly not conducive for higher studies, much less research. This ‘apartheid’ in science made the Indians react strongly during the last quarter of the nineteenth century” (Kumar, 2006, p. 30).

Indian scholars and scientists who had inclination for research enquiry suffered discrimination and humiliation at every step. Often research enquiry became a private affair for many of them due to discriminatory policies in pay and remuneration of Indians compared to Europeans. In fact, at one point in time noted Indian scientist, Acharya Jagdish Chandra Bose was so frustrated fighting with the government for necessary funds to support his research that he thought of quitting research altogether. At that time, Rabindranath Tagore came forward to raise Rs. 200,000 for J.C. Bose to construct a research laboratory to do his research independently (Kumar, 2006, p. 35).

Modern Indian Universities thus became “retailers of knowledge” as Jayaram (2007) has argued, rather than creators of “new knowledge”. Jayaram (2004) further argues that, the term higher education suggests some level of homogeneity. But, within the India context, the use of such a term actually “glosses over the enormous structural and functional diversity within the system” (p. 90). It can be argued here that this diversity within the system emerged and evolved during the British colonial period as the system struggled with colonial policies and repression of Indian intellectuals and scientists.

The culture of teaching and testing to secure coveted government jobs became institutionalized in the colleges and universities, while scientific pursuits for new knowledge creation continued outside the formal ambit of universities within independent research institutes. This created what is known as a “two-boxed disease” (Parthasarathi, 2005) of Indian higher education. The Indian Higher education system has been diagnosed to be suffering from “two-boxed disease” because new knowledge would be generated by creative problem-solving scientific minds in separate research institutes funded by Philanthropic donations outside of the mainstream public (mostly underfunded by the government) higher education system. Research Institutes and labs were set-up during the colonial times by struggling indigenous scientists often outside of the mainstream Higher Education System. The history of the

establishment of the Bose Institute¹ with philanthropic support from Rabin-drath Tagore and Sister Nivedita is a great example. The struggles during the establishment of the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) with philanthropic support of J.N. Tata and Sister Nivedita's brave legal battle with the colonial government is ~~also~~ another great example to demonstrate how the “two-boxed disease” emerged during the colonial era (Som, 2017). Hence, there is little circulation of new knowledge created in separate research institutes and the mainstream system of the university and the affiliated colleges, that emerged ~~since~~ the colonial times.

Moreover, the colonially transferred system of affiliated college system that grew around Calcutta University, Madras University and Bombay University mushroomed into large-scale “retailers of knowledge” in postcolonial India. Students and teachers within this large-scale mainstream system are, therefore, burdened with stale outdated curriculum and knowledge that have little connection with the needs of the changing society and economy. This disconnect between education and society germinated during the British colonial era as it has been eloquently discussed by Rabin-drath Tagore in his series of essays and lectures on education within India and abroad beginning in 1892 with the essay “Shikshar Herfer” meaning Topsy-Turvy Education.

As a highly creative, sensitive and visionary individual, Tagore could perceive the damage this disconnect was doing and would do in the future. In his essays, Tagore critically analyzed the problems of education as he observed during his times. Like a trained sociologist of education and a comparativist, Tagore compared education in England versus education in colonial India to highlight the ways in which education was integrally connected to the needs of the industrializing and colonially expanding Britain and Europe, while education within colonial Bengal and India was increasingly getting disconnected from local society and its needs (Tagore, 1892, 1906).

Hence, Tagore sought to reform the Indian education system from school to the higher education sector by building an alternative system in Shantiniketan for community engagement and also to foster international understanding at a time when international tension and racial segregation was becoming a global norm within India and around the world. As an education reformer and a “rooted-cosmopolitan” (Appiah, 1996; Mukherjee, 2020; Purkayastha, 2003), Tagore sought to reconstruct education as a social process to reconnect the aims and objectives of education with the needs of his contemporary society. A “rooted-cosmopolitan” is someone who is proudly embedded in his/her own cultural context and yet has an open mind in accepting and embracing people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The following sections of this chapter will, therefore, analyze Tagore's own writings and archival documents of his

interactions, particularly with the Tagore Circle at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, to theorize Tagore's reform efforts during colonial British India.

3 Pedagogic Reform as "Creative Resistance"

Education as a social process is invariably affected by local and global politics. The pedagogic reform efforts of indigenous education reformer, Rabindranath Tagore, was a form of "creative resistance" against repressive colonial government policies to suppress Indian scholars and scientists, as discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter and as it has been analyzed at length by Kumar (2006) and Seth (2007). It is also well documented in the 1835 'Minute' on Indian Education that the educational aims and objectives during British India were overtly designed to serve the interest of the colonial government to reproduce "a class who may be interpreters between us [the colonizers] and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835, p. 34).

Contrary to the pedagogic aims and objectives of education for colonial governance mentioned above, Tagore sought to rediscover the aims and objectives of education essentially as liberation of the mind from all shackles and bondage. He drew on spiritual gnostic definition of education embedded in old Sanskrit saying – सा विद्या या विमुक्तये (Education is that which Liberates the Mind) (Ghosh & Naseem, 2003). He sought to re-instate pride among the indigenous Indian population about their languages, cultures and heritage by reviving spiritual philosophical aspects through education marginalized under colonial subjectivity and domination. His primary aim of education was to free their minds from all kinds of parochial thinking. As Tagore wrote in one of his famous oft-quoted poems, which was also quoted by South African freedom icon, Nelson Mandela in a letter he had written from Robben Island on August 3, 1980 to the secretary of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations thanking them for the honour of "Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding"²:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the depth of truth

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
 Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
 Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit
 Where the mind is led forward by thee
 Into ever-widening thought and action
 Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake

Despite the emphasis Tagore laid on indigenous languages, cultures and heritage, Tagore was far from being a parochial thinker. He was a true patriot of India in every sense and composed some of the most patriotic songs dedicated to Mother India. The concept of the country as Mother India, or “Bharat Mata” in the form of a Mother Goddess emerged during the anti-colonial freedom struggle within the Indian subcontinent. Freedom fighters and native intellectuals (irrespective of religious affiliations) plunged into the freedom movement with the slogan – “Vande Mataram” (meaning I Bow to thee Mother) on their lips. The poem by the same name was published by noted Bengali literary figure, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in 1870. But, sung for the first time by Rabindranath Tagore, the poem became a marching song on the streets as resistance against the British administration’s decision to Partition Bengal on religious lines to divide the Hindu and Muslim freedom fighters (Eck, 2012, p. 95). However, as a “rooted cosmopolitan” Tagore reconciled the home and the world beautifully in his conceptualization of a world-minded Indian university in colonial British India. He offered some of the scathing critiques of the concept of nationalism and championed intercultural education through the study of foreign languages and arts for international understanding (Tagore, 1918). As it is evident in the quote at the beginning of chapter, Tagore’s vision of a University was intrinsically international in common pursuit of truth and knowledge for the benefit of humanity and not any particular nation or race.

Though Tagore expressed great concern about the direction in which scientific progress was leading humanity in his last testament – the “Crisis in Civilization” (1941/2000), he also championed scientific education and enquiry throughout his life. He supported and promoted the scientific work of Acharya Jagdish Chandra Bose. He also sent his own son Rathindranath Tagore, and a student, Santosh Majumdar to study agricultural science at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In fact, his pedagogic project was in many ways an act of “creative resistance” against the domination of colonial pedagogic processes to rediscover the center of Indian culture, which rested on philosophical enquiry based learning and scientific knowledge creation. In the

lecture (later published as 'The Centre of Indian Culture') Tagore (1919/2003) delivered at Chennai, he emphasized:

... though our physicians are now practicing in every town and village and hamlet of the country, and though many of them are of good repute and making money, all this extensive experience of theirs has not resulted in any new theory, or great fact, being added to the science of medicine. Like good school-boys, they have only applied with over cautious precision just what they have learnt In spite of our present defective education, I cannot admit that this is due to any defect in our natural powers. There was a long period in the past, during which the science of healing with us was a living growth ... in those days our mind was in living connection with its acquirements; and then, we did not merely learn by rote, but made our own observations and experiments; that we tried to discover principles and build hypotheses and apply them to life. Where has this initiative and courage of ours departed? Why do we tread so carefully, under the load of our learning? Is it because we were born to be serfs, permanently bending under the burden of another's intellectual acquisitions? Never!

As it is evident from the above quote and other essays on education written by Tagore, he also identified the problem of rote learning with colonial processes. Education in an unfamiliar foreign language and the system of competitive mass examination for coveted government jobs were identified by Tagore as the root cause for superficial rote learning exacerbating the problems of education. However, even while offering his "creative resistance" towards colonial pedagogic processes for rediscovering indigenous philosophical and scientific enquiry, Tagore could not envision himself or his students as isolated from the rest of humanity. Hence, Tagore (1921) wrote:

Hereafter my life and all that I have – which is only a little – is to be devoted to establishing first in India, and then elsewhere, if possible a university in which the better minds of all races, to whom we most look for leadership may mingle, and the culture of the East and the culture of the West may be united in fellowship. It is [people] of the world mind that we need, [people] of spirit, that we need to see we are all citizens in the Kingdom of Ideas.

Compared to Tagore's vision of International Higher Education as expressed in the quote above over a century ago during colonial British India, in the

established research literature, internationalization of higher education is seen as a more recent phenomenon, that has evolved over the past 20–30 years mostly in North America and Europe (Proctor & Rumbley, 2018, p. xxii). This evolution has gradually shifted away from a focus on the values of international cooperation, diplomacy and international exchange between people and cultures to a focus on international student recruitment and setting up of branch campuses overseas (as it was also envisioned by Tagore) but, often led by market needs and commodification of higher education as a service industry to propel national economies and growth of GDP, rather than promoting international understanding and peace. However, scholars who have studied the way in which international higher education has evolved in North America and Europe since the 1990s still consider international higher education as having potential for building relations between nations and people, and promoting understanding across cultural differences. (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011; de Wit, 2013; Jones & de Wit, 2012; Proctor & Rumbley, 2018).

4 Uncommon Histories

The following sections of this chapter will further reflect on Tagore’s conceptualization and establishment of a world-minded Indian University in British colonial India much before the concept of internationalization of higher education became popular in academic research literature and public discourse driven by neoliberal market needs. In doing so, this section will also reflect on the international relationships and connections that Tagore established, especially with the Tagore Circle at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. It will reflect on the people to people relationships Rabindranath Tagore and his son, Rathindranath Tagore established with people in the Urbana campus town and Chicago to fulfill common goals of establishing Visva-Bharati for rural reconstruction and development, irrespective of uncommon histories.

Both Urbana-Champaign and Shantiniketan were parochial places in their own way. They were both rural homogenous communities with very little regional or international diversity. During the early twentieth century when Tagore sent his son, Rathindranath Tagore and one of his students, Santosh Majumdar to study in the United States, very few people there knew about India and Indians. In fact, even Chicago was quite parochial in the early twentieth century. Before arriving in Champaign on a train from Chicago, Rathindranath and Santosh had sent a telegraph to the then secretary of campus YMCA, Mr. Miner asking him to send somebody at Champaign station to receive them. However, when nobody arrived, they found out later that the

lady in the Chicago telegraph office herself changed the telegraph to “Two students from Indiana” arriving, thinking that a place “India” did not exist! Hence, nobody came to receive Rathindranath and Santosh at the station thinking two students are coming from the neighboring state, Indiana (Bera, 2006).

However, Tagore, because of his elite upbringing in a cosmopolitan environment in colonial Calcutta and driven by Upanishadic universalist ideals sought to open up the minds of people for rural reconstruction and bottom-up development, as well as international understanding for reconciliation and peace (Bagchi, 2016). On the other hand, in the United States, UC Berkley had already started building international reputation in the early twentieth century in South Asia, especially because of their Indian students’ involvement in the Indian Freedom Movement from overseas (McMahon, 2001). In fact, Tagore had initially intended to send his son and student to study at Berkeley. However, due to the great San Francisco earthquake and fire in 1906 and the following chaos on the west coast, Tagore eventually sent them to study at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign because of an American friend’s advice (Tagore, 1958). ~~In fact, under~~ the leadership of President Edmund J. James (1904–1920) Urbana-Champaign campus was also slowly opening up to the possibility of enrolling international students, initially mostly Chinese students. The First office for foreign students in the United States was set up at Urbana-Champaign during President James’ time (Solberg, 1999).

After sending his son, Rathindranth and student Santosh to study at Urbana-Champaign, Tagore visited the United States five times – in 1912–1913, 1916–1917, 1920–1921, 1929 and 1930. He visited Urbana three times. He stayed at Urbana, Illinois longest for three months during one of his visits in 1912–1913. During this time, he exchanged several letters with President James, who requested him to deliver a few lectures at the University. However, since the time during the semester was not suitable for Tagore, he delivered a series of lectures on Upanishads over the Christmas holiday at the Unitarian Universalist Church on campus under the leadership of Harvard Divinity School scholar, Reverend Vail. Tagore instantly found himself surrounded by a close circle of friends and admirers among the Unitarian universalists on campus. A Tagore Circle was formed on campus and they continued interactions with the poet and philosopher through letters even after he left for India.

Hurwitz (1961) writes that:

... the warm reception given to Rabindranath Tagore in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, is very encouraging to those people who, like the Indian poet, are desirous of world peace and world brotherhood. Even in this provincial mid-western American community, there was a large group

of enthusiastic people who immediately responded to Tagore and were sympathetic to his plea for world cooperation In these dark days of international tension and animosity, it is heartening to recall the love that went out in America to this gentle Indian pleading for international cooperation and understanding. (pp. 35–36)

~~In fact,~~ despite uncommon histories, the Tagore Circle at Urbana-Champaign and Tagore bonded because of their common goals. In the next section of this chapter, I will identify and elaborate on these common goals.

5 Common Goals

Despite uncommon histories, the Urbana-Champaign campus town in the United States and Tagore’s Shantiniketan campus had ~~and still have~~ many similarities. Both ~~are~~ rural residential university campuses close to two historically important and bustling cities – Chicago and Calcutta. Moreover, an intrinsic connection grew up between the people at Urbana-Champaign and Tagore. Kallick (1992) has beautifully identified this connection in the following lines:

On November 9, 1912 Tagore gave the first readings of his work in the United States at the University of Illinois, Urbana. The Tagore that the people of Urbana had come to know was quite different from his subsequent public image. After his Nobel success in the United States, he is chiefly thought of as a ‘romantic poet and mystical prophet’. But to his friends in Urbana, Tagore was a spiritual and energetic thinker and reformer. In fact, Tagore and his first audience shared many common goals.

These common goals brought Tagore and the Urbana Tagore circle together. They were concerned with finding solutions to the problem of rural reconstruction and religious factionalism. They were equally passionate about democratic education, scientific pragmatism, spirituality and universal humanism.

6 Democratic Education, Scientific Pragmatism and Universal Humanism

A democratic education provides practical solutions for improving society. The University of Illinois was part of a growing movement towards democracy in American Higher Education. It was being slowly promoted that access to

higher education was not to be limited to just the elites living in their Ivory Tower for theory building. Established under the Morrill College Land-Grant Act of 1862, the University of Illinois (originally named “Illinois Industrial University”) was part of a National plan to provide affordable technical education to the masses of students in the fast industrializing rural community. The Urbana-Champaign community and rural American community at large were extremely concerned about rural reconstruction in the context of the fast industrializing North America, influenced by similar development in Europe in the early twentieth century. Of course, later the University took a more comprehensive focus with agriculture, social sciences and liberal arts curriculum to provide a more holistic, and well-rounded higher education to the rural community.

In the context of colonial British India, Tagore (much like many other great Indian thinkers of his times, including Gandhi) was equally concerned about education for the masses. The revolutionary and non-violent freedom fighters sought to fight for freedom from colonial rule to prevent the drainage of material resources out of the country in order to alleviate poverty and deprivation of the masses. However, Tagore sought a much larger freedom for the people. Freedom from the darkness of illiteracy and ignorance. As a true philosopher, he sought to free/liberate the minds of the people from all kinds of parochial thinking through education, and sought to empower them with the necessary skills needed to earn their living for self-reliance. He was very much against the narrow instrumental focus that education had taken during those times to secure coveted colonial government jobs. ~~In fact, he~~ considered this kind of instrumental education designed in a non-native language, i.e. English for the native elites to pass tests for recruitment in government jobs, promoted rote-learning (Dasgupta, 2009; Roy, 2017).

Tagore wrote his first essay on education, *Sikshar Herfer* (Topsy-turvy Education) in the year 1892, and thereafter wrote several essays on education as he was building his own school and university, Visva-Bharati. From the very beginning Tagore thought that it was not possible to solve the problems of economic and social reconstruction of the rural community and India at large without holistic well-rounded education. The pedagogical model that he established at Shantiniketan – both at the school level and higher education, involved enquiry-based practical experiential learning from the surrounding environment and nature, rather than bookish knowledge. This is evident from the following quote:

Children should be surrounded with the things of nature which have their own educational value. Their minds should be allowed to stumble

upon and be surprised at everything that happens in today's life; the new tomorrow will stimulate their attention with new facts of life. What happens in a school is that every day, at the same hour, the same book is brought and poured out for him. His attention is never alerted by random surprises from nature. (Tagore, as quoted by Dasgupta, 2009, p. 109)

Tagore conceived education as an intrinsically social and relational process. He was extremely concerned about the growing mechanization of the teaching-learning process and relationship between teacher and students. Tagore wrote with deep concern that:

economic forces compel the teacher of today to look for pupils, but in the natural order of things it is the pupils who should look for the teacher. The teacher is now a tradesman, a vendor of education in search of customers, and no one expects to find affection, regard, devotion, or any other feeling in the list of goods he has for sale. (Tagore, as quoted in Dasgupta, 2009, p. 121)

Hence, Tagore called for revisiting and re-discovering the ancient Indian model of *Gurukuls*, *tols* and *chatuspathis*, where teachers and students would live within a residential school complex, where bookish knowledge was not the most important part of education. Rather, knowledge would be gained from observing the environment within a cultural atmosphere where the teachers were dedicated to their vocation. Tagore stressed that, “I would like to mention that this idea is also found in the great seats of learning in Europe” (as cited in Dasgupta, 2009, p. 115). Hence, Tagore called for a spiritual meeting of the best from the East and the West to reform education to achieve humanistic goals for social reformation and environmental conservation. Tagore wrote:

Great civilizations in the East as well as in the West, have flourished in the past because they produced food for the spirit of man for all time; they tried to build their life upon the faith in ideals, the faith which is creative. These great civilizations were at last run to death by men of the type of our precocious schoolboys of modern times, smart and superficially critical, worshippers of self, shrewd bargainers in the market of profit and power, efficient in their handling of ephemeral, who presume to buy human souls with their money and throw them into their dust bins when they have been sucked dry, and who, eventually, driven by suicidal forces of passion, set their neighbors' houses on fire and are themselves enveloped by the flame. It is some great ideal which creates great societies of

men; it is some blind passion which breaks them to pieces. (as cited by Dasgupta, 2009, p. 131)

Tagore discovered these great ideals among the Urbana-Unitarians and also in some Chicago residents, such as Harriet Moody, just as they discovered these ideals in him. Kallick (1992, p. 23) writes:

The Urbana religious liberals, by virtue of their open-minded search for human perfectibility, struck a deep note in the heart of Tagore. The mixture of high ideals and practical applications resembled his own. A number of the women and men that shaped the University of Illinois at that time shared a common vision with Tagore. As a social reformer, Tagore found resonance in the ideals he encountered in Urbana from Unitarian educators and clergy, faculty and students.

In the middle of the British colonial rule and the freedom movement in India, race relationships were extremely strained, just as it was extremely strained in racially segregated United States. However, the Tagore family provided a living example of racial and cultural equality. His son was instrumental in setting up the Cosmopolitan Club at the University of Illinois. It was a great living symbol of the internationalist agenda stressed by the Tagores. Several letters exchanged between the Tagore Circle in Urbana and Harriet Moody in Chicago discussed the pressing issues of racial and religious disharmony and dreamt of a future society based on universal brotherhood and compassion across racial and religious differences (Aronson, 2000).

7 Creative Resistance

Despite colonial oppression and ensuing racial and religious disharmony, Tagore championed rationalism and social sciences for the spiritual unity of all races and religions. He was at once at home in the world and exhibited great ability to bridge the gap between the global and the local, and reconciling his pedagogic project for decolonization with his scathing critique of the ideology of nationalism. He was truly a “rooted cosmopolitan”, as I have argued in another paper (Mukherjee, 2020). In order to counter the effect of aggressive British nationalism and colonialism, he sought to bring together diverse civilizational influences, cultures, crafts, and people to his Shantiniketan school and Visva-Bharati.

Tagore strongly believed that a University was the best place where the meeting of minds, cultures and civilizations were possible with a free spirit of dialogue or intercultural exchange. Tagore boldly claimed:

We are building our institution upon the ideal of the spiritual unity of all races. I want to use the help of all other races, and when I was in Europe I appealed to the great scholars of the West, and was fortunate enough to receive help. They left their own schools to come to our institution, which is poor in material things, and they helped us develop it.

I have in mind not merely a University, for that is one aspect of our Visva-Bharati, but the idea of a great meeting place for individuals or all countries where men who believe in spiritual unity can come in touch with their neighbors. There are such idealists, and when I travelled in the West, even in remote places, many persons without any special reputation wanted to join this work. (as cited in Dasgupta, 2009, p. 112)

Just as Tagore sought to reform the social aspect of colonial education by bringing people from diverse racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds together, Tagore also sought to reform the pedagogic aspect of ~~contemporary~~ education during these times. He sought to promote a personalized flexible curriculum at his school and university with a balanced mix of the arts and the sciences. Though early education of students in his school was encouraged in the mother language, Tagore promoted and encouraged the learning of many foreign languages, including English in his school and the “Bhasha Bhawana” (The House of Languages) at his University. While Tibetan Language and art was already being taught in Bhasha Bhawan, as part of his grand plan of establishing a world-minded University, he also established the Chinese language and study center at his University – “Cheena Bhawan” in 1937. Classes would be held outside in small groups under the trees inside the campus to promote a harmonious relationship between students and nature. Students would get engaged in hand-on vocational education alongside conceptual knowledge. Moreover, a culture of care for each other and care for the other species and the environment was promoted by engaging students in poultry-keeping, gardening and farming work (Bagchi, 2016; Dasgupta, 1998, 2009, 2013).

8 Conclusion

Tagore’s essay “The problem of Education” (1906) analyzed the main problem of mainstream education over a century ago and sought to establish an

alternative model of education as creative resistance. Unfortunately, the problem of education, that Tagore resisted, is still very much part of the mainstream system of education in India and in many countries. Moreover, in an attempt to decolonize, in many postcolonial nation states, curriculum was revised to make it extremely focused only on the local context. However, the forces of globalization with faster mobility of people, money, images and even dreams and desires (Appadurai, 1996, 2006) have made our lives more and more interconnected and interdependent in the twenty-first century compared to the previous century when Tagore made the observations quoted above.

There is no doubt that the mainstream factory-model of education, which was developed in the colonial metropole, had its own purpose to train the masses of assembly-line factory workers to meet the needs of the first industrial revolution. When this model was transferred to the global South to train the elites in the colonies for colonial government jobs, they were not well integrated with the needs of the native society. As a free-thinker and observer, Tagore (1906, p. 67) critiqued this process by stating that:

The schools in our country, far from being integrated to society, are imposed on it from outside. The courses they teach are dull and dry, painful to learn, and useless when learnt. There is nothing in common between the lessons the pupils cram up from ten to four o'clock and the country where they live; no agreement, but many disagreements, between what they learn at school and what their parents and relatives talk about at home. The schools are little better than factories for turning our robots.

Hence, when Tagore, the “rooted-cosmopolitan” and internationalist built his own school and university, he focused on creating a more open cosmopolitan environment in the residential ashram with a strong belief in the spiritual unity of all races as it is also evident in the old Sanskrit saying “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (All on this Earth is One Family). This indigenous belief also aligns with the African notion of “uBuntu” (I am because of who we all are) that emphasizes the interconnected nature of life. Tagore’s “creative resistance” against narrowly-focused instrumental education to meet the needs of colonial political economy and his conceptualization of Visva-Bharati (a world-minded Indian University) for new knowledge creation and international understanding was driven by an underlying strong belief that ‘the earth’ is ‘one single country’ as eloquently expressed in his 1922 essay “Creative Unity” (Bagchi, 2016, p. 69).

In this age of sustainable development, we are facing ~~pressing~~ global challenges, such as environmental destruction, climate change, terrorism, refugee

crises, and inequality threatening our collective home, as well as the extinction of many living species on Earth, including the humans under the recent Coronavirus crisis! Scholars and experts around the world are concerned about the sustainability of the planet earth and are constantly emphasizing the role of quality education – both at the level of school and higher education. Critical scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, such as Connell (2007), Chakrabarty (2007), Mignolo (2009) and, Chen (2010), as well as those in the field of comparative education have argued for the need to consider seriously Southern theorizing³ of social problems and creative resistance offered by the intellectuals from the global South (Hickling-Hudson, 2009; Mukherjee, 2019; Takayama et al., 2017). Isn't it wise then to read and re-visit the critique of mainstream education and creative alternatives offered by intellectuals and reformers from the Global South, such as Rabindranath Tagore?

Notes

- 1 <http://www.jcbose.ac.in/history>
- 2 See <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/nelson-mandela-letter-mrs-manorama-bhalla-secretary-indian-council-cultural-relations-3-augu>
- 3 “Southern Theory” is a sociological term established by Raewyn Connell (2007), who argued for the inadequacy of applying theoretical formulations from Northern European countries to analyze sociological problems and data from Southern postcolonial countries. Hence, emphasizing the need to engage with the critical scholarly work of the intellectuals from the Global South.

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