

# Holistic Development : A Tagorean Vision

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**Abstract** The paper highlights the fact that development is not to be viewed in a piecemeal fashion, nor in economic terms only. But it is to be viewed in a holistic fashion. Although these views are now being emphasized in the contemporary discourses on development, it was said by Tagore, several decades ago. It is now time to look at his visions and ideas to engage in development for an all-round development of man, which could also launch an attack on sharp divisions in society.

**Key words** holistic; development; communion; rural reconstruction

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## I

The world, we are living in, is a bundle of unprecedented contradictions. On the one hand, we are living in extra-ordinary opulence, unprecedented advancement in science and technology, entrenchment of democracy at the grass-root level, and on the other, there are persistence poverty and hunger, deprivation of basic freedoms and amenities, lack of education, threats to the environment and acute gender disparities. "Overcoming these problems is a central part of the exercise of development" (Sen xi).

In fact, in the post Second World War period, development has emerged as one of the leading concepts in academic discussions and debates as well as a major policy and strategy for the States to follow. Thus, it has both theoretical and practical aspects. USA and USSR emerged as the two leading superpowers of the world as also the iconic nations of development. Other countries, particularly the developing nations of the so-called 'third world' tried to follow these nations through industrial and technological advancement leading to 'economic development'. The basic objectives of this phase are modernization, industrialization, controlled market economy and/or state socialism, expansion of the base of political power and social mobility. It was thought that by 'trickling down' effect development will ultimately reach to all people.

During the 1960s, however, the theory of modernization and economic growth

came under challenge, particularly from the ‘dependency’ theorists who took an extremely pessimistic view of industrialization and economic growth and particularly what was followed by the developed western nations. They argued that capitalism for its own growth and development creates satellites or dependent states and the dependency of these peripheral states on the core advanced states is necessary for capitalism’s own sake.

The 1980s again saw a radical shift particularly in the US and UK when a neo-liberal shift on the part of the State could be noticed as the States began to bent upon an uncontrolled free market economy. Accompanied with these differences in economic growth and development, a noticeable shift could be found in terms of increasing emphasis on development along apparently non-economic factors like ecological development, sustainable development, gender development and more on ‘human’ development as such.

In fact, there has been a radical shift in analyzing development in the post Cold War era when due to several factors emphasis is given on an integral concept of development rather than on a purely economic one. The “trickling down” effect of development was thought to be ineffective and the Basic Needs Approach (Hettne 36) was favoured which talked of incorporation of the development guarantee for the weaker social sections in all development programmes. Development has been seen as a major process of expanding freedoms and as an instrument of removing obstacles to unfreedom by Sen (1999). Development has been seen as an instrument of social change by McMichael (2004).

## II

The traits of development which are found in contemporary developmental discourses could surprisingly be found in Rabindranath Tagore’s literary works. Tagore, who is regarded as one of the greatest poets, philosophers, musicians and visionaries of the world, was never a student or researcher of social science or economics or politics. He was, however, a believer in social communion, a great educationist, a deeply aware social individual and above all a true champion of humanity. Such a man obviously thought about human development, which was remarkable in many respects although conditioned by India’s the then socio-economic and political conditions. Although Tagore was a true child of modernity and a true representative of Bengal renaissance, he was well aware of the fact that the western culture and civilization which were imposed by the British upon India would not be a fruitful one. What is remarkable about Tagore’s idea of development is the fact that he through his various writings conveyed his ideas of development and also through his *Śāntiniketan* and *Śriniketan* experiment tried to implement his ideas of development.<sup>1</sup>

At the outset, it must be stated that Rabindranath being a poet, philosopher and litterateur did not present his views on development in a detailed and systematic manner. They are scattered in his essays, articles, novels, poems, short stories, dramas, diaries and also in letters written to different people. However, trying to assimilate the idea of development from all these sources would be too big a task, which would not be possible within the purview of a single paper. The author of this paper

will try to analyse his ideas of development by focusing mainly on his essays and articles and also by delving into his Śūntiniketan-Śriniketan experiment as that would give a complete vision of his ideas of development.

Tagore, as should be noted, is a societal man. He believed that social norms, values and beliefs constitute the Indian psyche. Love for each other, togetherness, inter-personal relations constitute the basic ingredients of society. However, for Tagore it is the spirit of sacrifice that is more difficult to attain than the spirit of love. The society, in fact, truly grows up by shedding one's ego, one's selfishness and one's altruism. Tagore talked about a society, which is a conglomerate of people who are self-reliant, sacrificing, welfarist and collectivist.

When Tagore talked about development, he talked about the development of this man, not the one, who pursues his own development, his own career, his own ambitions to the detriment of others, but the one who believes in the development of all living beings of the society. Tagore was also a great humanist. By development, he did not mean the development of material goods only but the all-round development of man where production of material goods plays a particular role. As Krishna Kripalini described him, "he was human and humane, a fully developed person who loved to experience the joys of life" (Kripalini xv).

Tagore's vision of development of man living in society is holistic in the sense that he did not talk about his concept of human development from several facets and discussing each in a separate isolated manner. He believed in the development of man who is very much living in the society from an integral whole where nothing is imposed externally but has grown up from within the society. He believed in the harmony of life. His personal life was harmonious and noble which has been reflected in his creation at all spheres. In fact, all through his life he tried to bring harmony in every sphere, wherever there was any possibility of contradiction.

The basic and most robust characteristic of Tagore's philosophy of life was his emphasis on the development of the human personality and his deep-set conviction that there is no inherent contradiction between the claims of the so called opposites—the flesh and the spirit, the human and the divine, love of life and love of God, joy in beauty and pursuit of truth, social obligation and individual rights, respect for tradition and the freedom to experiment, love of one's people and faith in the unity of mankind. These seeming opposites can and must be reconciled, not by tentative compromises and timid vacillation but by building a true harmony out of the apparent discordance. (Kripalini 136)

Tagore's writings were most pronounced in the early 20th century. It was at this time that western scholars also displayed their ideas of harmony and one such noted scholar was L. T. Hobhouse, who while championing the ideas of social liberalism, enunciated the ethical doctrine of social harmony. While discussing liberty, he believed that it was important relative to a specific end—the realization of personality; that a set of liberties that could assure opportunities for self-fulfillment to all depended on a complex system of social restraints. To Hobhouse, there were several ways of social de-

velopment—but most led to suffering and conflict. The harmonic way was a narrow path, and to keep it required conscious adjustment, to reconcile the diverse moments of social life. For the individual, the good consisted in the realization of his or her potential in a balanced expansion of personality. For society, it lay in the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing fulfillment. This was the essential bearing of Hobhouse's ethical harmony. On the one hand, the various dimensions of individual life should be harmonized in a well-rounded personality; on the other, the trajectories of self-realization adopted by the different members of the community should harmonize in a general flourishing (Meadowcroft xviii). In his doctrine of ethical harmony, Hobhouse was principally motivated by his desire to establish justice and his passion for humanity.

Hobhouse's theory was teleological in the sense that he wanted to modify liberalism by making it more social and by trying to reconcile the relation between individual and society, and thereby developing a version of social liberalism. Tagore's vision of society, on the contrary, was a true successor of Vedic and upanishadic harmony, on the one hand and East-West harmony, on the other. Throughout his life he never discarded the enduring values of the West; at the same time he deeply revered the upanishadic values.<sup>2</sup> His earnest efforts were to bring about a new harmony in the society which would give shape to a progressive civilization. He dreamt for the day when all the nations of the world would come and get united on this Indian soil.

In conversation with Albert Einstein, when the scientist told the poet that modern physics do not look into things in contradiction and cited the examples of clouds which look as such from a distance but as disorderly droplets when seen from close quarter, the poet replied that there are parallels in human psychology. Our passions and desires are unruly, but our character subdues these elements into a harmonious whole. It is the constant harmony of chance and determination which makes the drama of existence eternally new and living.

### III

Human Development that Rabindranath talked about was holistic in concept. His conception of human development can be analysed from (a) physical health; (b) educational development; and (c) developing the spirit of communion. And in all these traits of human development, he tried to find out that harmony which informs all his ideas.

Tagore was very much conscious and particular about a good physical health. He underscored on physical strength and considered a lean, weak and frail man as not being able to achieve his goal. Tagore was very conscious about food, nutrition and exercise. He himself was very sincere about maintaining his own health. In his childhood he was trained in wrestling. He used to bathe in cold water in the morning almost all through his life. He knew horse riding, was an expert swimmer who could cross the river padmā<sup>3</sup> and could walk fifteen to twenty miles at a stretch. He dreamt of a healthy society where he himself tried to set an example.

In one of his letters written to Pearson (1922), he referred to the santāl<sup>4</sup> women who lived near Śāntiniketan as the ideal of physical life. In them the ideal of physical

life finds its perfect development only because they are active in giving it expression in work. Their figures and their movements attain beautiful harmony because they are always being tuned to life's activities. The poet appreciated and admired the cleanliness of their limbs, which never get soiled even by constant contact with dirt. He believed that cleanliness cannot be induced by artificial polishing and caring but by the body's own current of movements, which comes from the blood, muscles, nerves, from the completeness of physical health. He had an immense love and faith on work and to him love and work are like sun and light for love's expression is in work and where there is no work, there it is a dead world.

Tagore's second major point of emphasis is on the educational development of man. He understood that a proper method of imparting education as well as a proper curriculum are necessary not only for the development of an individual but also for the development of the society at large. Tagore was very much against traditional learning and also against imitating blindly the western education. He emphasized on informal education along with formal education. Tagore tried to combine western knowledge with Indian tradition and tried to introduce a new spirit, a new philosophy and a new technique in the sphere of education, and thereby, tried to modernize Indian education in a truly Indian manner. But he did not rest just by listing the components of education. He implemented his ideas on education first by establishing an informal school for children at Shilaidaha Kuthibari<sup>5</sup>, followed by the establishment of Śāntiniketan brahmacharyāshram in 1901, which ultimately culminated into the establishment of Visva Bhārati in 1918.

Tagore's views on education may briefly be summarized as follows:

First, in his scheme of education, the role of nature has been specifically emphasized. In fact, his concern for nature, his emphasis in incorporating nature into educational curriculum show his views regarding the need for establishing bonding between nature and society. In *Japanyatrī* (1916), *bhūmilakshmi* (1918) and *tapovan* (1909), he expressed his anxiety about the rift between man and nature. Here also, he considered man and nature in an integral whole, in a balancing union which would be disturbed with too much mechanization, urbanization and industrialization. He wanted to make people aware from their school days. Second, he emphasized on joyful learning. He was very much against rote learning and forced learning, which he beautifully portrayed in *totākahinī*. He almost revolted against this type of learning, when he himself was a child and tried to do away with it by establishing the educational institution founded by him at Śāntiniketan. Third, he favoured learning through mother tongue. He emphasized on introducing Bengali as the medium of instruction even in higher studies. Finally, he was very clear about the aims of education. He believed that education should aim at building self-confidence and it should be formulated taking the socio-economic and political conditions of the country in which it is situated.

In Tagore's view, education was not intellectual development alone. It should also develop a student's aesthetic nature and creativity. The quest for knowledge and physical activity in an agreeable environment were integral parts of the process. Freedom and creativity are linked in Tagore's thought, one conditioning the other. It was

necessary, Tagore felt, to make the younger generation aware of their national cultural heritage and to grasp its significance for them. At the same time, education should bring children face to face with the cultures of other countries and persuade them to learn from them.

He was very much concerned with women's education. His educational institutions have almost always been co-educational and the number of female students is conspicuously large at Śāntiniketan. He wanted women and men to be offered similar theoretical courses with separate practical courses for women, since their roles in life differed from those of men. Tagore considered teachers to be very important in any scheme of education. He wanted teachers to help young children to grow on their own as a gardener helps the young plants to grow. He wanted to use education as an instrument of change to make Indian young men and women more rational and less subject to meaningless social and individual rituals.

Tagore believed that the more people go beyond the limitations of their animal nature, the closer they come to humanism, freedom and unity and are then able to develop their creativity. (Jha 603) This quest alone gives a meaning to life, and education is an effort to make life meaningful. Here the aims of the individual and those of the community have become almost one.

The final edifice of Tagore's concept of development is the spirit of communion which he forcefully presented in 'Svadeśī Samāj' (1904). He firmly believed that Indian society is deep rooted in the Indian psyche with everyone having a duty toward everyone. Tagore never lost faith upon people and believed in people's power. He talked about a social leader in this essay, who unlike a political leader could really unite people. Tagore was deeply concerned about a probable threat to Hindu-Muslim unity and believed that a social leader could only foster unity amongst people.

#### IV

As stated earlier Tagore did not confine himself to suggestions and prescriptions only. His experiments with respect to education at Śāntiniketan and with respect to rural reconstruction at Śrīniketan are well known. The Śāntiniketan brahmacharyāŚram, which Tagore built for imparting all-round education to pupils leading to a harmonious development of body and soul was a residential school where teachers and pupils led a communion life. Here along with conventional studies of science, literature, humanities and social science, training of songs, dances, painting as also training of judo and other forms of martial art were imparted. Viśva Bhārati, which was the culmination of Tagore's educational experiment, was a place where, he combined Indian tradition and modern European education. It was perhaps, the only University at least at that time where programmes of rural reconstruction were incorporated. Thus rural reconstruction evolved as one of the basic ingredients of Tagorean educational system.

Following the ideas of some of the worthy sons of India like Rājā Rāmmohan Roy<sup>6</sup>, Prafulla Chandra Roy<sup>7</sup> and Swāmi Vivekānanda<sup>8</sup>, Tagore considered rural development as the basis of India's development. Tagore while performing his duties as a zamindār<sup>9</sup> at Śilāidaha and Patisar<sup>10</sup> in 1880 came in direct contact with villagers and could share their sufferings and joy, sorrows and happiness, complaints and ful-

filness. From experiencing the lives of the poor villagers, Tagore channelized his ideas of rural development into a constructive programme called rural reconstruction.

Tagore started his programme of rural reconstruction by purchasing a house and land at Surul<sup>11</sup> from Lord S. P. Sinha in 1912 which formed the nucleus of his rural reconstruction model. The programme started with a general survey of rural life and proper investigation into the economic and social problems of village life. Kālimohan Ghosh assisted in this survey and evolved a methodology which could very well serve as a model method of data collection. The data thus gathered served as an essential tool of decision-making before the real work got started. The main objective of the rural reconstruction programme was to try to flood the choked bed of village life with a stream of happiness.

Śrīniketan aimed at combining work with joy. Picnics, excursions, games, music, theatrical performances and celebrating socio-religious festivals constituted regular features of the calendar. Varsha Baran (New Year's Day), Varshūmangal (Rainy Season Festival), Nabānna Utsav (the New Rice Festival), Vasantotsav (the Spring Festival) were—and still are—all regular Features. Tagore added Halkarshan (Ploughing the Land Festival) and Van Mahotosava (Tree Planting). Apart from adding joy to dreary village life, some of these festivals brought students and villagers to work together.

Tagore realized that the problems of rural reconstruction were manifold and the problems related to health, economy, education etc. are interlinked and should be attacked in an integral manner and not in a piecemeal fashion. From the very beginning, Elmhirst, the principal architect of the programme laid emphasis on gathering of knowledge through survey and attacking the problems. Here also alongside the agricultural development through cooperative and collective farming, emphasis was given on education. Thus, rural reconstruction was incorporated in the educational curriculum of the āshramites and education was incorporated in the rural reconstruction programme and thereby making both important and inter-dependent.

A few words about gathering and dissemination of knowledge as conceived by Tagore at this point would not be out of place, particularly in view of the fact that these have become so very important for any research, School or Departments in an institute of higher learning. In the Śrīniketan experiment, it has been conceived in the following way:

1. To take up the problem of the villages and the field into classroom for study, discussion and for probable solutions;
2. To carry the knowledge and experience gained through classroom to the villagers in their endeavour to improve their sanitation and health, to develop their resources and credit, to help them to sell their product and buy their products to the beat of their advantages, to teach them better methods of growing crops, and of keeping vegetables and livestock, to encourage them to learn and practice art and crafts and to bring home to them the benefits of associated life, mutual aid and common endeavour. (Ray, Biswas and Sen 96)

Tagore was convinced that what the villagers needed most for their own salvation was knowledge, a cooperative spirit and an encouragement to self-help.

## V

Thus the notion of development that Tagore talked about is essentially about human development. But he was not human-centric as he viewed of development as one of integration, harmony and balance. It is like his songs where the words complement the music and create a perfect harmony. Rabindranath's love of nature was inspired by the awareness that all living beings, including animals, trees and plants, are endowed with a soul. On this level of consciousness, human beings are equal with "low" creatures and plants. We are all co-creatures of God's creation. Accordingly, Tagore's praise and worship of nature is born of a deep spirit of togetherness and feeling of a creational bond between humans and nature. In very many of his poems and songs, this integration of nature and humanity could be found. This emphasis on ecological development or what is called sustainable development has recently got currency in the western discourse of development.

Tagore always thought of human beings in their totality. Again of late in India, reference to inclusive development is increasingly being made. But Tagore dreamt of inclusive development and did not rest with dreams; he put them into practice by focusing upon the marginalized people in first his *kāligrām* and then in his *Śrīniketan* experiment. He had enormous respect and faith upon the power of the marginalized people and enunciated the premise of popular participation in the process of development in *pallīr unnati* (1915). Today the Indian planning process is exactly talking about these aspects by emphasizing micro-level planning, bottom-up approach and others. Tagore's thinking was inclusive and over-arching in another sense too. He found no divisions amongst the Hindus, Muslims and the *sāntals*, who lived adjacent to *Śrīniketan*.

Tagore's system of education has found a particular place in today's world. At one point of time, when Tagore was talking about learning through fun, there were few-takers. Ironically, it is exactly upon this aspect that the modern system of education is emphasizing. He wanted to unfold the entire personality through music, songs, dance, theatre, art, contemplation of nature, meditation and social service. In the educational scenario of today's world, the demons of "usefulness" and "efficiency" are being tamed by the intentless playful activity of Tagorean education. The crux of Tagore's educational philosophy was learning from nature and life. Tagore also attached great importance to *tapasyā* and *sādhanā*. Tagore was critical of the way in which education was designed to be job-oriented. Referring to its end of earning bread and butter Tagore observed,

From the very beginning such education should be imparted to village folks so that they may know well what mass welfare means and may become practically efficient in all respects for earning their livelihood. (*pallīr unnati* 501)

Finally, a word or two about Tagore's dance movement in the process of develop-

ment. Dance, a great form of art was unfortunately looked down upon by the Bengali educated middle class during Tagore's time. Tagore not only brought back dance's old glory by incorporating them in his song-plays and dance dramas but was also able to include in school curriculum for all-round development of people. Moreover, Tagore considered these dance as excellent exercises, where participant performers could know each other and thereby could develop a feeling of communion amongst themselves.

Thus, it is the whole, integral society's development that Tagore talked about, it is the harmony of nature and humanity that Tagore visualized; and it is the integrity of education and rural reconstruction that Tagore dreamt of in his ideas of development. I may conclude by referring to one of poet's immortal songs:

The people of the world are mesmerized by the tune of the world.  
It is everywhere; in the land, in the water and in the sky,  
In the forests and jungles, in the rivers and streams,  
In the mountains, caves and the coasts.<sup>12</sup>

### [ Notes ]

1. Sāntiniketan and Śrīniketan are two adjoining places in the district of Birbhum in the state of West Bengal. The poet built up his educational system at Sāntiniketan, which blossomed into Visva Bhārati University, where an integrated system of education is imparted; while Śrīniketan is his site of rural reconstruction.
2. Upanishadic value is difficult to comprehend. It may be referred to as the attainment of Self as delight, where the all-pervasive is hidden behind the apparent names and forms.
3. Padmā is the principal distributary of river Ganga, flowing into the then East Bengal (the modern day Bangladesh).
4. Santāl, one of the largest ethnic groups of India live in West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Jharkhand. A large settlement is at Birbhum district, where Vishva Bhārati is located.
5. Shilāidaha is a place in the Kustia district of Bangladesh.
6. Rammohan Roy is regarded as the first modern man of India. He was a social reformer, and was a pioneer of Bengal renaissance during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Prafulla Chandra Roy was a great scientist specializing in Chemistry who also ventured into the field of entrepreneurship during late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
8. Swami Vivekānanda was a monk and the chief disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Paramahansa and founded the Ramakrishna Mission, one of the largest philanthropic societies during late 19<sup>th</sup> century; one of the greatest exponents of Vedāntic philosophy, he played a key role in introducing it in Europe and America.
9. Zamindār is a landlord.
10. Patisar is a village in the Naogaon district of Bangladesh.
11. Surul is a village in the Bolpur sub-division of the district of Birbhum in West Bengal, India.
12. A song of Geetimālya, written by Tagore in 1914, translated by the author.

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