

ESSAY

## The Educational Philosophy of Thoreau and Tagore: A Union of Theory and Practice

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THOREAU and the great American Transcendental philosopher Henry David Thoreau were born in the same century i.e. the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Thoreau was born in 1817, forty four years before Tagore's birth. It is quite interesting to notice how the Transcendental theory of Thoreau and Emerson had had so much influence on Tagore. To me, it seems as an inquisitive reader Tagore might have been influenced by the Transcendental philosophy. In this paper my aim is to notice the Transcendental Education found in Thoreau and Tagore's writings. I am not a Thoreau specialist, nor do I claim myself to be an expert in Tagore's writings. After reading both Tagore and Thoreau I have noticed how theory and practice are married in their educational philosophies. Henry Adams (1838-1918), a great American writer, remarked in his essay Education "Unless education marches on both feet-theory and practice it risks going astray" Only Thoreau tested the theory by practice. He fully accepted the faith in his youth and lived the Transcendental life. He simply chose to transact Transcendental theory on the personal level hoping that his success in uniting Idealism and practical life might prove socially useful in an age of growing industrialisation and materialism. For this union of Idealism and practical life Thoreau chose Walden Experiment; on the other hand, Tagore chose the Shantiniketan Experiment. Although the experiments are different they call for a renaissance - a new birth of a world which could evolve a plan for the education of mankind. The discovery of such a plan, it was expected would simultaneously solve the problems of the individual, the local community, society or culture group, the nation and mankind as a whole "To be a philosopher" Thoreau said, "is not merely to have subtle thoughts ... but so to love wisdom as to live, according to its dictates a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically," (Walden).

Thoreau's contemporaries were hardly aware of the point when he complained about their complicated lives when he suggested 'mass of men' were leading 'lives of quiet desperation'. What we call 'progress' was not always necessarily 'progress' to Thoreau, what we call 'success' was not always a 'success' to Thoreau. Thoreau claimed that perhaps primitive man led a happier and meaningful life in some ways than ours. Surprisingly after a century later i.e. in the 20<sup>th</sup> C we are really faced with the problems he predicted. It would be a mistake if we consider Thoreau a primitivist who advocated for abandoning civilisation and going to the woods. Thoreau did not abandon the physical advantages of modern science. He complained we were not making the best possible use of them. If we notice today's powerful electronic media Thoreau's thoughts are worth considering. We are interested in the dresses of Princess Diana rather than communicating great ideas. We build a railroad to get to the city an hour faster and then waste the hour when get there. Had Thoreau lived to see the advent of the television set and the jet plane he could have found better uses for them than we are putting them to. If we look at Tagore we notice that he as a Transcendentalist was not also against science or industrialisation, but he was very much against a system that turned people into machines. Tagore was against a system which made labours instruments of production for the profit of masters. He was amazed at the Technological progress by the then Soviet Union. In his Letter from Russia he wrote

"... their leaders wanted to cement the base of their construction work as quickly as possible and did not hesitate to apply force in order to achieve it. But however great the need may be force is one-sided thing. It can break but not create."

In Thoreau's Walden the same kind of voice is heard when he says"... how many a poor immortal soul have I met with well night crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life pushing before it a barn 75 feet by 40..." So a man who spends all his days at labour, work for worldly earthly goods has not the time for true human integrity. In this present civilised technological society, Thoreau thinks, men labour under a mistake.

Thoreau is not simply a negative and destructive critic. He is far more positive and constructive. He points out the problems of our society and at the same time points out the solutions. If we are confused by the complexities of present-day-society, there is a solution. 'Simplify, simplify, simplify' is Thoreau's byword. Society may be complex, but we must have the intelligence to select from that complexity what is important to us. We must have the courage to avoid the less important no matter what our neighbors think or say of us. We make futile attempts to lie at par with our neighbours who own private cars, palatial buildings and so on.

Thoreau says we waste too much time in getting a living, or trying 'to keep up with the Joneses'. If we would reduce our wants, we would really be able to do what we want to do. Tagore in his 'Sadhana' of Self-Discovery was also talked about the process of self-purification, self-discipline and self-discovery by adopting a simple life. He wanted life at the Shantiniketan Ashram to be 'simple', free from the tyranny of artificial needs and unnecessary things. Simplicity he valued because it was more likely to stimulate freedom of invention and creativity; provide a spacious atmosphere where the beauty and joy of spontaneous life expressions could appear. The following excerpt from My School of Tagore echoes Thoreau's concept of simplicity.

"There are men who think that by the simplicity of living introduced in Shantiniketan, I preached the idealisation of poverty which prevailed in the medieval age ----- I had to provide for this great teacher this bareness of furniture and materials not because it is poverty, but because it leads to personal experience of the world."

TRIBUTE

## Remembering R.K. Narayan

### R.K. Narayan's journey to the pinnacle of success was a long and arduous one.

C.V. NARASIMHAN

TRIBUTES to R.K. Narayan, who died "full of years and honours", have poured in from all over the world. All the major newspapers in India and the English-speaking world, The Times, London, Manchester Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The New York Times, have all carried excellent articles extolling his contribution to the world of letters. References have been made to his command of language - "widely regarded as India's greatest writer in English in the 20th century." The fictional town of Malgudi is a splendid creation of his imagination. His characters, humble men and women living their daily lives, have become real people of flesh and blood to us.

It was not always so. Only those who know of his early life know what a long, sometimes heartbreaking, always arduous road he had to reach the pinnacle that he ultimately scaled. His autobiography My Days gives an account of those early struggles. A fuller account can be found in the illuminating book by Susan Ram and N. Ram, R.K. Narayan: The Early Years - 1906-1945 (Penguin India, New Delhi, 1996).

R.K. was born on October 10, 1906 at Number 1, Vellala Street in Purasawalkam, Chennai. Much of his early childhood and school years were spent in his grandmother's house, where he was born. Later on, he moved to Mysore, where his father, R.V. Krishnaswami Iyer, served initially as a schoolteacher, and later became headmaster of Maharaja's Collegiate High School. R.K.'s academic grades were not of the highest during his school and early college days. In the B.A. examination he failed in History, but finally plodded through to get his B.A. degree. His two earliest full-length novels, Swami and Friends and The Bachelor of Arts, describe some of his trials and travails during this period.

He was pressed to take up a teaching or government job. But R.K. had already made up his mind that he was going to be a writer. He managed to get several contributions accepted by The Merry Magazine (a short-lived offshoot of Ananda Vikatan in English), and by The Hindu, where he eventually obtained a weekly slot in the Sunday edition. As a bachelor, his wants were few and could be met with an income of a rupee a day.

On July 1933, R.K. fell in love. He was staying in Coimbatore with a sister, and one day he "saw a girl drawing water from the street tap and immediately fell in love with her." This was Rajam, 15 years old at the time, tall (taller than R.K. by a couple of inches), slim and good-looking. He cultivated the friendship of Rajam's book-loving headmaster father, Nageswara Iyer, and one day he came out saying, "Sir I want to marry your daughter."

There were all kinds of obstacles, including the problem of matching the horoscopes (R.K.'s horoscope had 'sevvai dosham'), and how to earn enough to support a wife. But, as the Latin proverb says, "Love conquers all", and R.K. married Rajam in Coimbatore on July 1, 1934. Their only daughter Hemavati (name of a Carnatic raga), Hema for short, was born in March 1936.

The greatest personal tragedy of R.K.'s life came in May-June 1939,

Thoreau by simplifying his life found he could build a home for 25 dollars 12.50 cents and live on 27 cents a week. He easily earned enough to cover the expenses in six weeks out of a year, he spent the remaining forty six weeks to do as he pleased. He did not waste forty six weeks by sleeping gossipping but devoted them to writing and studying nature. Thoreau cannot be called lazy, because he in his short life created more than 20 volumes of first-rate prose. Thoreau's Walden was an attempt to work out a satisfactory relationship between man and his environment. He writes: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear, nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was not necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout that was not life...."

In the light of this excerpt it can be said that idealisation of nature was a typical transcendental thought in general. Both Tagore and Thoreau nurtured this thought Nature administered to both physical and spiritual needs; there was a correspondence between man and nature that is, every fact of nature correspondent ideally with a fact of consciousness in man's mind. Or, to put it in another way, everything in nature could be taken possession of by the human mind. Thoreau had a real taste of settled life in Concord, Massachusetts and he knew that wilderness was not a permanent home for men (wilderness) here means Walden). He thought one might go there for fortification. One should go to attain in order become, in a deeper sense, more cultivated and civilised, not in order to return to the crudities of life. Thoreau sought nature in order to arrive at a higher state of culture, so he practised individualism in order to create a better order of society. This correspondence between man and nature is noticed in a poem by Thoreau titled Than Inward Morning" (1842)

Paced in my mind lie all the clothes  
Which outward nature wears,  
And in its fashion's hourly change  
It all things else repairs.  
In vain I look for change abroad,  
And can no difference find  
Till some new ray of peace uncalled  
Illumes my inmost mind.

This inward morning is the kind of wakeful awareness he stressed throughout Walden, for example; it assesses the constant inspiration to be derived from Nature. What he was ultimately aiming at of course, as philoso-

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pher and Transcendentalist, was union or a sense of complete oneness with Nature; in order to achieve this he attempted a disciplined, ascetic life the idea of purity, purification of the channels of perception, often recurs in his writing and he observes Nature closely, practically gives himself up to the life in Nature.

This oneness with nature is also noticed in Tagore. He was a passionate lover of nature. What distinguishes Tagore is that he sees nature as a part of our own existence and our very identity. Nature express our thoughts, emotions and moods varied and changing as both are. Nature is also a kind of media which carries these through space as well as through time, to connect us with one another no matter how far we are, and to connect us also with the Creator. To enjoy the beauty of nature in which we see ourselves is, to Tagore, a meaning of life itself. The element of 'Nature' has always been considered as an essential part of the experiment by Tagore. In this regard his Shantiniketan experiment is worth mentioning. A student in Shantiniketan can widen himself/herself by growing aware of the vastness outside and by learning to take delight in Nature he/she discovers an inner enjoyer and connoisseur within himself and thus becomes a free man. In Nature man can learn the art of 'being natural with nature' and he also acquires the inexpensive power of being happy in nature. Tagore's Shantiniketan experiment has shown the ways of a general smoothing off of angularities, affections and conceits and softening down of exaggerations in personalities, a marked development of naturalness, gentleness and grace in general behaviour, and of self confidence, poise, self delight and independent judgement in reactions to life. It has been demonstrated at Shantiniketan how the element of nature can be admitted to the world of education, not merely as an ornament or a background, but as an active agent shaping and moulding man's nature, refining his senses, broadening and deepening his mind and widening his consciousness.

The element of nature is also considered to be an essential part of the experiment by Thoreau at Walden. Tagore's experiment has taught man the art of 'being natural with nature.' Besides teaching this art of 'being natural' Thoreau's Walden experiment is a record of practical experiments in building, cooking, planting, keeping warm, and measuring things out of sheer curiosity. Walden is a handbook on how to arrange economically the practical details of one's life. Thoreau says in Walden: 'I went to the woods because I wished to live thoughtfully to face only the necessary facts of life and to see if I could learn what life had to reach I wanted to live deep and drink all the Juices of life, to live so simply and strongly as to frighten away all

that is not life, to drive life into a corner and find out whether it is mean or noble. Most men, it appears to me, are in strange uncertainty about life whether it is of devil or of God." With this desire 'to live thoughtfully to face the necessary facts of life' Tagore also went to the villages to know about the farmers. He came to know about them through his administrative work. They were so helpless, so without resources, so dependent. He realised that until these people learned to stand on their own feet no one could save them, no king, landlord, not even God Himself. Tagore began to experiment with ways of improving the life of the farmers. He once called his tenants and said, "No one can help you but yourselves. Work that you can not accomplish singly, work that is of benefit to others, should be done together. When ten men work together they need not be afraid of either defeat or loss." Thoreau's concern for the farmers is also very strong in his Walden. He says: "Ancient poetry and old stories suggest, at least, that farming was once a holy art; but people farm today with unholy haste and thoughtlessness. Our purpose now is merely to have large farms and large crops. Today he is interested in the wealth (of his works) he can obtain from the soil. By greed and selfishness and a habit of regarding the soil as property, the face of the land is made ugly, farming is lowered in dignity with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives". This interest in wealth is not, according to Thoreau, a way to health, but to lives of quiet desperation. The farmer is poor Thoreau writes in Walden because he "is endeavouring to solve the problem of a livelihood by a formula more complicated than the problem itself. To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle." What Thoreau suggests as far as possible the farmer make his own shoestrings, wear his own cloth, grow his own food, and build his own house. "Who knows", he ask "but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands and provided food for themselves and family simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged?"

By the Walden experiment Thoreau attempted to establish a social order which would not reduce men to animals and machines but would devote them to the pursuit of self culture. In economics his aim is that each man should receive the whole product of his labour. The principle that each man should receive the whole product of his labour is noticed in Economy of Walden. Thoreau talked about a life which is based on subsistence agriculture and on handicrafts from where all trading and all wage earnings are excluded. He believed man's relation to nature has a permanent character. He is dependent on her for the basic means of keeping himself alive. When one manages his economic life successfully he is able to develop his higher potentialities.

Tagore's attitude to farmers is also full of sympathy. He strongly held the view that the land does not belong to Zamindars, but to those agriculturists who cultivate it. He did everything within his means to help his peasants. From 1890 to the year at his death in 1941, one of his principal interests was the peasant. He helped and made it possible for them to build their own schools and hospitals, roads and water tanks. Tagore wanted to rescue the farmers who led the meanest of lives.

Thoreau has criticised the evils of industrialisation. To him the industrialists are not interested in serving humanity; they are interested in unlimited wealth. That is why he advocates a life of simplicity and instructs the readers to thrive on the raw materials of nature. His essay 'Solitude' from Walden begins with 'delicious evening' when 'the whole body is one sense and imbibes delight through every pore'. Thoreau claims he never felt lonely and oppressed by a sense of 'solitude'. He sensed something kindred in everything he could see and touch. He further said 'What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? Who says man is alone in nature? Through nature's beauty one can see one's ownself'. The great Austrian writer Stefan Zweig commented on Tagore's book Sadhana:

"... the ideas which Rabindranath develops in Sadhana are of course hold, even ancient. Forever ancient, they are the eternal ideas which are to be found everywhere, in every spiritually evolved person, in each religion and each writer. They include, for example, the idea that man should not strive for power and possession but for the development of his inner being, his true self through which he is merged with the divine..." To Thoreau Nature was also a remedy for all the ills of civilised society. He said: "It is the marriage of the soul with Nature that makes the intellect fruitful, that gives birth to imagination." He was convinced that cities in their anxiety to exclude nature, form within their limits and to impose the urban pattern upon the surrounding region, were destroying their own source of vitality.

This attitude of Thoreau is strongly noticed in Tagore's one of the poems where Calcutta city seemed to him to be unsociable, artificial and too much materialistic. He said in Bide (Badhu, 1890).

Oh this city with its stony body!  
Its massive loveless fist has squeezed and crushed  
A young girl's feelings, pitilessly  
Where are the boundless fields  
The birdsong, the trees, the shadows!

Thoreau's Walden experiment was an experiment in human ecology, an attempt to work out a satisfactory relationship between man and his environ-

ment. He went to the woods because he wished to live thoughtfully to face the necessary facts of life. Like Thoreau Tagore's thinking on environment is reflected in his many poems. In one of his poems In Praise of Trees (Briksa bandana, 1931) he said:

O Tree, life founder, you heard the sun  
Summon you from the dark womb of earth  
At your life's first waking, your height  
Raised from rhythmless rock the first  
Hymn to the light; you brought feeling to the harsh  
Immassive desert.

So the tree is the life founder. To an environmentalist relation between man and nature is reciprocal. An injury done to man impairs his relation to nature; and an injury done to nature lessens the scope of man. That is why Thoreau said: "Every town should have a park where a stick should never be cut for fuel, a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation .... Let us keep the New world New, preserve all the advantages of living in the country". In the destruction of the woods Thoreau saw human destruction, the diminution of consciousness. He felt sorry for deforestation in his Walden. He said "I remember that when I first looked down through these waters there were many large trunks of trees to be seen lying on the bottom. They had either been blown over at one time or had been left on the ice at the last wood cutting, when wood was cheaper. But now they have mostly disappeared."

Tagore was never in favour of destroying woods. His Bana-bani (The Message of the Forest, 1931) contains a good number of poems and songs about trees some of which were written during the annual Tree Planting Festival that Tagore instituted in 1928 at Shantiniketan. Trees are often associated with meditation in Tagore's writings.

The whole of political philosophy of Tagore and Thoreau is based on the theoretical premise of individual conscience. I his essay 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience' (1849) Thoreau invokes Transcendentalist principles of moral law, the idea that a man's conscience is his first guide; for the Transcendentalists felt that the materialistic society encouraged apathy, complacency and passivity. There is a prophetic sentence in this essay: Action from principle not only divides families; ay it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine" So the teachings of the Transcendentalists harmonised with the rise of democracy, the rise of romanticism and revolt against any kind of Orthodoxy.

Tagore also believed that "the ultimate reliance of human being is and must be on his mind and conscience, his sense of right. The power of perceiving moral distinction is the highest faculty given to us by God." This power of perceiving moral distinctions inspired Tagore to send a message titled 'To the Conscience of humanity against General Franco's barbarism in Spain'. He wrote: "In Spain the world civilisation is being menaced and trampled under foot Against the democratic government of the Spanish people Franco has raised the standard of revolt ... Help the people's front in Spain, help the Government of the people cry in million voices 'Hail' to reaction come in your millions to the aid of democracy, to the succour of civilisation and culture."

So both Thoreau and Tagore as Transcendentalists sought to relieve mankind from narrowness and give him a freedom in all the variegated fields of life-experience. To them education was not just a passport to a vocation, nor was it meant to import a number of skills, serve one utilitarian purpose or another, or help attain any particular kind of efficiency and success in society. The true purpose of education was to facilitate a full acceptance of human life, and the education which could do this was the birth-right of every human child. Unfortunately man has too often ignored the inner voice and he is unable to hear the voice. Both Tagore and Thoreau think time has not run out. If man strives to return to be innocent of the childhood he could be able to hear the voice. Both of them think there can be greater moral progress in future through the adoption of teachings of Transcendentalism - a spiritual renewal of mankind. One of the major themes of Walden is that of renewal.

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when Rajam passed away following an attack of the dreaded typhoid. She died around midnight on Tuesday June 6, 1939. Perhaps she could have been saved with earlier diagnosis and proper treatment. In any case, it was before the days of the antibiotics or chloramphenicol. The next few months were R.K.'s darkest days. How he survived this ordeal, and was eventually able to resume his writing, is an epic of courage and determination. Little Hema was such a source of love and affection for him. Rajam was R.K.'s one and only love. "Narayan's loyalty to his wife was such that it would outlive her and prove lifelong". A full picture of his suffering and eventual recovery can be gleaned by reading his highly autobiographical novel, The English Teacher.

It is however time to get back to R.K.'s writing career. He had completed a full length novel, Swami and Friends, in the latter half of 1932. A young friend of his, Kittu Purma, was an undergraduate at Oxford at that time. R.K. sent the manuscript to him, and Kittu was eventually able to get the already well-known author, Graham Greene, who had a home at Oxford, to take an interest in getting this novel published. Surely this was destiny at work. Greene became R.K.'s guardian angel, so to speak, and eventually Swami and Friends was published by Hamish Hamilton on October 24, 1935. For this book, R.K. received an advance royalty of 200 English Income-Tax. R.K.'s net was 15 and 10 shillings!

From then on, Greene took upon himself the responsibility for getting R.K.'s next novel, The Bachelor of Arts, published. It was eventually published on March 15, 1937. Like Swami and Friends, the second novel was a critical success, although by no means a best-seller. His next novel, The Dark Room, was not autobiographical as his two previous books were, but a feminist view of middle-class family life in South India. It was published on October 11, 1938, and received good reviews from Western writers. One reviewer referred to "the Chekovian simplicity of the plot".

to call these meetings, "Our Night Club". Narayan's honours included the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Royal Society of Literature's Christopher Benson Award, and the Padma Bhushan in 1964, elevated to the Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian award, in 2000. When I called on him with congratulations, R.K. said, with his usual self-deprecating humour: "I am now a Padma Vidushaka."

One honour eluded him. Even as early as 1961, when I was very close to Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the United Nations and a member of the Swedish Academy that selects the Nobel Literature Prize recipient, I had suggested to him two Indian names for consideration for the Nobel Prize for Literature - Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan. Hammarskjöld died in a tragic plane accident in Ndola, Africa, a few weeks later, on September 16, 1961. R.K.'s name was proposed many times later, but nothing came out of it.

The Swedish Academy reminds me of a tycoon who had a big placard on his desk facing any visitor - "There is no reason for what I do - it is my policy." It has seen fit to award the Nobel Prize for Literature to two most unlikely awardees - Bertrand Russell (1950), and Winston Churchill (1953). Churchill was of course a great statesman, also a historian and biographer. Russell was a mathematician and philosopher. They had no pretensions to literary merit, but there they were! On the other hand, H.G. Wells, and among R.K.'s contemporaries Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, and E.M. Forster never made it. R.K. was in very honourable company.

R.K. has often been compared with Chekov. To my mind, R.K.'s short stories often remind me of O. Henry, with the surprise ending - for instance The Gift of the Magi. R.K. also reminds me in his short stories of such contradictions as Oliver Goldsmith once noted - "The man recovered of the bite; the dog it was that died."

I would like to mention one point that has been only briefly noted - R.K.'s gift of his two eyes to the Eye Bank of Sankara Netralaya, Chennai.

I came to know R.K. in the early 1960s during one of his visits to New York, and we remained good friends thereafter. We had a very good common friend, Jim Rubin, who died of leukaemia when in his prime. Jim was a great aficionado of Carnatic music and attended the Music Festival in Madras every December. His collection of tapes and videotapes was presented to the Ethno-Musicology Center of Harvard University on his passing. He had a truly remarkable gift for friendship, and R.K. had immense affection for him.

Natwar Singh too was a common friend. In his book, Profiles and Letters, he has recorded another instance of R.K.'s wry humour. At the U.N. Dining Room, at the end of luncheon, R.K. wanted a cup of coffee. The waiter asked him, "Black or white, sir?" R.K. replied, "Brown".

When I called Natwar on May 13, 2001 to tell him of R.K.'s passing, he was devastated. He said "It is a great loss to world literature" - a fitting epitaph for one of the greatest writers of our time.