

Rabindranath Tagore and Female Education: a Problematic Discourse

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Abstract

The paper will focus on the rather problematic subject-positioning of Rabindranath Tagore in his relation with female education. While Tagore truly was a strong champion of female education and was responsible for starting coeducation in his school in the first decade of twentieth century, his approach to female education is strongly adherent to the conventional gender roles assigned to the female sex by the norms of patriarchal society. In his essay *Stri Shiksha* (“Female Education”, 1936), Tagore presents his argument for women and men being essentially different and meant to fulfill different purposes in life. Thus, in his opinion, education for women needed to be tailored to suit the needs of women which he deemed to be different from that of men. The reflection of this value-system can be found quite clearly in the operations of Brahmavidyalaya and later, Visva-Bharati. Tagore’s stance vis-à-vis female education is problematic not because of this one simple reason; rather it is intensified by the fact that Tagore braved harshest criticisms from the society at large in order to ensure that the female students of his institution get sufficient opportunity for creative self-expression through performing in theatre and dance on the public stage. The paper would thus explore and analyze this contradictory, problematic and layered relationship that Tagore had with female education.

Keywords: *education, gender roles, stereotype, Tagore, Visva-Bharati*

The name of Rabindranath Tagore has found a permanent place in the history of female education owing to the extraordinary contributions made by Tagore in the field. Tagore, being one of the most notable figures in the field of education reform in India, reimagined the colonial education system and created an entire biosphere of education where the prevailing colonial

education system was replaced by an education system that derived its roots from the Vedic gurukul and formed its character through a harmonious blend of Vedic ideals and Tagore's unique aesthetic sensibility. But where the subject-position of Tagore becomes problematic is the fact that he approached female education, both theoretically as well as practically, from the perspective of conventional gender roles. In spite of introducing path-breaking steps in the field of the self-expression of the female students, Tagore was unable to break out of the gender conditioning system that determines the conventional roles of male and female in the patriarchal society.

Tagore's school was one of the rare places in his contemporary India where the system of coeducation was practiced and female students were just as welcome as male students. Admittedly, this opportunity for the female student was not present at the inception of the Brahmacharyashram – the school established by Tagore at Santiniketan – in 1902. In fact, the very idea of the *brahmachari* is a predominantly male one even though in ancient India there were instances of female *brahmacharis* or *brahmacharinis*. But when Tagore started his school, he did not open its doors to female students because the education of girls was still very much a contentious issue at that time. The prevailing social attitude towards female education and a residential school for girls can be easily surmised from a letter written by Tagore to Manoranjan Bandyopadhyay who had been in charge of Tagore's school at an earlier time. In this letter, Tagore clearly states his reason for not having opened a female section in his institute earlier than 1908. He writes,

বিদ্যালয়টি বেশ পূর্ণ হয়ে এসেছে। ক্রমে তার পাশে একটি বালিকা বিদ্যালয়ের ছোট্ট চারা আপনিই গজিয়ে উঠেছে এবং ছ ছ করে সেটি বেড়ে ওঠবার মতলব করছে। অনেকদিন থেকে মনে ইচ্ছা ছিল, ভয়ে এগইনি-ঠাকুর ঘখন আপনিই ঘরে এসেছেন, পূজা না করে ত আর নিষ্কৃতি নেই। (Chithipatra, et. al. 79)

[The school has developed quite a bit. Gradually a little sapling of the female section has naturally come into being by its side and is trying to grow rapidly. I had wished for it since quite a long time but fear kept me from getting into it. When God has Himself arrived, there is no choice but to worship Him.]

Quite evidently, Tagore's willingness towards female education ran counter to the social attitude but at this particular period, Tagore did not have any desire to launch an enterprise that would be in direct revolt against the socio-cultural milieu of the time. It would be in the later years i.e. from 1919-1920 onwards, that Tagore left behind any trepidation regarding social censure. But his desire for educating girls was a persistent one and in accordance with this wish, Kshitimohan Sen entrusted the responsibility of educating his sister-in-law Hemlata Sen and two daughters of Prasannakumar Sen, Hiron and Indu, upon Tagore. To their number, another three were added in 1909, only one of whose names has been recorded: Labanyalekha. The school opened its doors to girls in 1909 with these six students and it is worth noting that the classes for male and female students were held together, effectively making it a coeducational practice.

Further on, Tagore faced a number of hindrances in maintaining the school for girls and it was witness to various ups and downs regarding the inclusion of female students. But the major focus in this section is upon what Tagore considered as the necessary and right education for women. In this regard, I attempt a close reading of Tagore's essay "*Stri Shiksha*" and, through that, interpret and analyze Tagore's ideas about female education. The essay opens with references to the objections to female education that were prevalent in Tagore's times. Without dwelling on those oft-repeated objections, it is necessary to problematize instead what, in Tagore's opinion, should consist of female education. Tagore accepts that men and women have an equal right to gain knowledge of all that is worthy of knowing in the world. However, the problem arises when Tagore states that men and women are created to be different and that difference cannot be ironed flat by providing the two sexes with the same education. He clearly states that if there be no difference in the way men and women are educated, then that would amount to a refusal to abide by Nature's law: "কিন্তু তাই বলিয়া শিক্ষাপ্রণালীতে মেয়ে পুরুষে কোথাও কোনো ভেদ থাকবে না, এ কথা বলিলে বিধাতাকে অমান্য করা হয়।" [But it would be disregarding God if we do not keep any distinction in the modes of educating men and women.] (Tagore, et. al. vol. 16). This sentence reeks ominously of gender stereotyping as Tagore opines that men constitute one type while women another type in Nature. Tagore proceeds to divide knowledge into two categories—pure knowledge and behavioural or application-oriented knowledge. He

accepts that in the field of pure knowledge the male and female students can stand as one but he raises an objection to the same holding true in the field of behavioural knowledge.

Tagore refuses to accept that men and women can have the same field of operation in life. In woman's desire to get the same education as man, he sees her denial of the fundamental truth that women are created to be physically and psychologically different from men. This is deeply problematic, as Tagore wandered into the dangerous territory of gender roles and social conditioning. He says,

মেয়েদের শরীরের এবং মনের প্রকৃতি পুরুষের হইতে স্বতন্ত্র বলিয়াই তাহাদের ব্যবহারের ক্ষেত্র স্বভাবতই স্বতন্ত্র হইয়াছে। আজকাল বিদ্রোহের ঝুঁকে এক দল মেয়ে এই গোড়াকার কথাটাকেই অস্বীকার করিতেছেন। তাঁরা বলেন, মেয়েদের ব্যবহারের ক্ষেত্র পুরুষের সঙ্গে একেবারে সমান।

[The nature of women's body and mind is different from that of men and that is why their behavioural sphere is separate from that of men. But at present, under the fiery influence of rebellion, a group of women are disavowing this basic fact. They say that the behavioural sphere of women is completely the same as that of men.] (Tagore, et. al. vol. 16)

Here Tagore is trying to define the basis of men's and women's behavioural existence as impossibly different, as if it would be ludicrous to imagine the fields of their operation ever being same. He goes to the extent of invalidating the claims of equality made by women by saying that those claims arise simply from the passion of rebelling against society. He denies those claims from having any truth or substance to them. In other words, Tagore, in this essay, does nothing other than standing behind the gender stereotyping that had been propagated by patriarchal society through the ages.

In his following argument, Tagore cleverly manipulates his statements so that it can be proved that women's claims of having been compelled to comply to the wishes of patriarchy are false; rather, women out of their own free will complied to the wishes of patriarchy because if that be not so then women are naturally servile. Tagore tries to establish his argument by saying that only the naturally servile would submit to such a fate and anyone who is not naturally servile

would rather die and not tolerate such treatment. Thus, it is made evident to the reader that women have either willingly complied to the lot meted out to them by patriarchy or they are naturally servile as they have not died protesting.

Such an argument is very difficult to swallow in a society of equals because it conveniently shifts the onus of patriarchal repression on the shoulders of women by implying that they themselves are the cause of what their lot has become. The essay goes on to essentialize women by stating that it is natural for women to love and be wives and mothers. This essentialization is done to prove the fact that women's compliance arises from her natural inclination towards being a wife and mother, thereby cancelling out the possibility of servility: “আসল কথা এই, স্ত্রী হওয়া, মা হওয়া, মেঘেদের স্বভাব; দাসী হওয়া নয়।” [The truth is that it is female nature to be a mother and to be a wife—not to be a slave.] (Tagore, et. al. vol.16). It thoroughly negates the possibility that some woman might not feel comfortable in these gender roles made compulsory for her by society. She might have no wish to be a loving wife or mother at all. Tagore states that society judges women in accordance with what he terms as the Law of Love, which turns all women naturally into loving wives and mothers. The unfairness of such a parameter does not strike any chord with Tagore. According to him, the stated compliance can be shameful only when there is no love but only duty. But the question arises as to why one half of society would need to comply with the ways of the other half rather than there being a mutual compliance. What is further problematic is that Tagore deems that the sphere of women's operation, that is, the domestic life of being a wife and mother, is a place which has been naturally chosen by women rather than it having been prescribed by patriarchal society as the limited space allotted to woman for her existence. Such a statement nullifies the whole system of patriarchal power structure where women are denied agency and sufficient power to choose their own field of action. The divide between বারমহল (the outer or public section of the house) and অন্দরমহল (the inner quarters where women were confined in accordance with societal norms) is thus simplistically explained away by Tagore as the consequence of a natural choice made by women. The history of the denial of women's desires, the erasure of her identity and selfhood that occurred as a result of this segregation of her sphere of action, is invalidated by the argument forwarded by Tagore: “...সমাজে মেঘেরা যে ব্যবহারের ক্ষেত্রটি অধিকার করিয়াছে সেখানে

স্বভাববশতই তারা আপনিই আসিয়া পৌঁছিয়াছে, বাহিরের কোনো অত্যাচার তাহাদিগকে বাধ্য করে নাই।”
 [...cannot dismiss the fact that the behavioural space that women have occupied is somewhere they themselves have naturally reached and they have not been compelled by any external force.]
 (Tagore, et. al. 16).

The purpose of writing this is not to prove Tagore as a person with narrow patriarchal mindset by dint of which he aimed to suppress women. Such a description of Tagore would be invalidated by the countless representations of female figures that we find in his literary oeuvre where he depicts their struggle to find their own identity and live life on their own terms. “*Strir Patra*” (“The Wife’s Letter”), *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*), *Jogajog* (*Relationships*), *Chitrangada*, *Rakta-karabi*, *Tapati*, “*Aparichita*” (“The Unknown Woman”) and “*Sabala*” (“The Powerful Woman”) are only a few of the numerous writings where he speaks about the significance of female agency and the desperate struggle that women are mired in owing to being the powerless half in the patriarchal power system. Such a depiction of women in his short stories, novels, plays and poems only serves as a major contradiction when pitted against the thoughts expressed by Tagore in the essay under discussion. Perhaps this contradiction is symptomatic of the contradiction that was a part of Tagore’s own psyche, which was unable to truly view the sexes as equal in spite of the respect and understanding shown towards women both in his literary oeuvre and his actions in real life.

Here it is also worthy of mention that in all his essays dealing with the topic of education, even after 1909 when girls entered the school, Tagore constantly refers to students as “ছেলেরা” or “boys”. We are thus left with the question as to whether the student was necessarily a male figure for Tagore or if the choice of word is regulated by linguistic norm where childhood, irrespective of it belonging to a boy or a girl, is denoted by the term “ছেলেবেলা”, literally “boyhood”.

Now, to return to the way Tagore’s school operated in reality, we find that it was a space where male and female students did have the equal opportunity to enjoy the three pillars of Tagore’s educational philosophy as stated earlier: freedom, creative self-expression and education through active communion with man and Nature. The female section of the school had to be closed down due to operational difficulties for a period of two years. When it was reopened, Tagore had a batch of fresh female students who were mostly daughters and sisters of

the teachers of the school. To name a few: Maya, the daughter of Haricharan Bandopadhyaya; Usha, the sister of Sudhakanta Raychoudhuri; Ranu, the daughter of Phanibhushan Adhikari; Manju and Jaya, daughters of Surendranath Tagore; Amita Sen, the daughter of Kshitimohan Sen (two more daughters and a niece of Kshitimohan Sen joined as well). Tagore himself taught their Bengali and English classes, accounts of which have reached readers through the writings of many students of that period. The classes were held in the coeducational manner where boys and girls had access to the same teaching (Ghosh and Sarkar 95). Amita Sen has provided detailed accounts of her days as a student of Tagore's institution in two of her books "*Santiniketan e Ashramkanya*" and "*Ananda Sarbakaaje*" from which one can glean that Tagore laid emphasis on the education for the female students orientating them towards domestic duties such as cooking, serving food, nursing the ill, embroidery and mending of torn clothing items. While there is no harm in these activities being a part of education, the problem arises from the fact that only female students underwent this training and male students did not participate in the same thereby reinforcing the gender roles that would leave the female students confirmed that cooking, serving, nursing, mending clothes are functions that they mandatorily have to perform while strengthening the already established conviction of the male students that the above activities belonged to the female members of the society. Amita Sen's account only reinforces this problematic situation as she expresses her admiration towards this initiative by Tagore as describes it as inevitable part of "মেয়েদের মেয়ে হয়ে গড়ে উঠবার প্রয়াসে..." (the effort of girls to become girls) thus reaffirming the way the gender roles had been internalized by her through her education (Sen, *Santiniketan e Ashramkanya* 63).

In spite of this, Tagore cannot be deemed as a conservative upholder of patriarchal norms. That he was indeed committed to cultivate academic excellence in his female students is testified by the fact that he encouraged his female students to engage in serious academic research as well, which reveals the healthy respect that he had for the academic capacity of the female brain. One can take the instance of his student Rama whom he encouraged to engage in research about women's position in Bengali literature of the pre-Bankimchandra period:

রমা শান্তিনিকেতনে আমার একক্লাস (sic) নীচের ছাত্রী ছিল, বাংলা ছিল তার বিশেষ পাঠ্য। তারা কজনে মিলে রবীন্দ্রনাথের কাছে গিয়ে হাজির হতেই তিনি তাদের পাঠ্য

সম্বন্ধে খুঁটিয়ে নানা প্রশ্ন করলেন এবং বললেন, “কলেজের পাঠ্য বই- এর গত্তীর মধ্যে থাকলে শিক্ষা সম্পূর্ণ হয় না। মৌলিক কিছু করতে হবে।” রমাকে বললেন, “তুই বঙ্কিম-যুগের সাহিতে নারীর স্থান বিষয়ে গবেষণা করু।”

[Rama, a female student, was my junior by one year at Santiniketan. Her special paper was Bengali. When a few of them went before Rabindranath, he at once asked them various probing questions about their studies and said, “Education cannot be complete if one remains limited within the boundaries of the college texts. It is necessary to do something original.” To Rama he said, “You should take up research on the topic of women’s position in the literature of the pre-Bankim period.”] (*Santiniketane Ashramkanya* 39)

Thus, even though Tagore’s essay on female education can be criticized severely for its insistence upon traditional gender roles, in real life, Tagore provided constant encouragement and support to his female students in their academic pursuits and had faith in their artistic and academic abilities as demonstrated by the incidents mentioned above. Tagore was indeed a pioneer in the methods he applied in educating female students. He went against every convention of his time by not only starting coeducational classes but also actively involving girls in the performing arts and bringing them on stage to perform live in front of public audiences in Kolkata—something that was unthinkable for the Bengali *bhadralok* society as far as women were concerned.

Tagore facilitated the creative self-expression of his female students by teaching them to dance, sing and act. His sincere commitment to this cause is attested by the fact that he himself performed the role of dance-teacher to his female students prior to the arrival of the professional dancers to Santiniketan for the purpose of proving a proper dance education. Amita Sen writes,

মণিপুরী এবং দক্ষিণী তালের শিক্ষা নৃত্যশিক্ষকদের কাছে আমাদের শুরু হয়েছিল, সে তো অনেক পরের কথা। শান্তিনিকেতনে প্রথমবর্ষের সব উৎসব অনুষ্ঠানে নাচ রবীন্দ্রনাথ নিজেই সবাইকে শেখাতেন। ... আশ্রমকন্যাদের যখন তিনি নাচে নির্দেশনা দিতেন তখন এটাই তিনি বারে বারে বলতেন গানের ভাবটা যেন নৃত্যভঙ্গীতে ফুটে ওঠে, সমস্ত মন প্রাণ চেলে দেহের ছন্দোময় গতি দিয়েই যেন আমরা গানটি গাই।

[It was much later that our training in dance commenced under dance-teachers from Manipur and the South. In Santiniketan, for the programmes held in various occasions by the first-years, Rabinbranath himself taught dance to everybody. ... When he directed the girls of the ashram in dance, he repeatedly said that the concept of the song must find expression in the dance – that we should sing the song through wholeheartedly infusing it with the rhythmic movement of the body.] (Sen, *Ananda Sarbakaaje* 39)

In later years, Santiniketan witnessed the arrival of Buddhimanta Singh and Nabakumar Singh as teachers of Manipuri classical dance, two unnamed women – a mother-daughter duo – from Gujarat as teachers of Gujarati folk dance and Vasudev, a student from South India, who taught the students what Amita Sen states as “দক্ষিণী নাচের ছন্দ এবং ভঙ্গী” [the rhythm and expression of southern dance] (*Ananda Sarbakaaje* 80) It is a great loss that Sen does not mention the specific dance type that the students had learned from Vasudev but essentializes the varied classical dance types of South India as southern dance. But one can safely conclude that it must have been a classical dance style from South India that the students had learnt.

A rather personal anecdote from the life of Amita Sen can serve as a powerful example of how Tagore was teaching his female students to negate the moral-policing of contemporary society as well as reevaluate the conventional standards of aesthetics. Tagore had particularly admired the costume worn by traditional dancers of Java during his visit to that country and had procured a costume for use by his female students at Santiniketan. Accordingly, when Sen was attired in that costume at the eve of the production of *Rituranga* at Santiniketan, her married elder sister insisted on her wearing a veil round her shoulders as she was afraid that her in-laws, who were among the audience, would be scandalized by the form-fitting costume. It was an insistence that Sen firmly refused to accept displaying the uncommon ability of a young girl to gainsay the conventional aesthetic morality of her time (*Ananda Sarbakaaje* 90). Needless to say, it could not possibly had taken place in an atmosphere of stifling patriarchal values.

In the light of these contradictory practices and events, Tagore as a female educator and educationist emerges as an ambiguous figure who braved intense societal critique in order to convey to his female students what he viewed as true and holistic education for them yet failed to

regard the student simply as a student irrespective of gender. Tagore arose above his time and society in educating his female student but sadly, he did not rise quite enough. Perhaps that is only the evidence of Tagore's very human fallibility but in an academic, analytical study, the gendered approach of Tagore towards education remains to be interpreted and critiqued.

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