

Revisiting Tagore's Philosophy of Education: A Perspective on Social Sustainability and Human Development

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Abstract:

A common and longstanding view is that good and systematic education can only be attained formally, through schooling, thus overemphasizing the role of educational institutions. Not only does this burden schools and universities with a broader social function, but it also puts knowledge at the center of classroom learning, which has been treated as a primary purpose of education at different levels. What can education really do for sustainable development? We propose that education needs a broader definition in the context of global South; it should be considered as deeply related to human development, and it should be in service of humanity. The main purpose of the study is to review and analyze the dominant ideology about how education functions in society. As part of the inquiry, we examine the tension between the contemporary educational system and the issues in sustainable development, especially when viewed through Tagore's ideology of education.

Keywords: human development, sustainability, education policy, humanity.

"The young mind should be saturated with the idea that it has been born in a human world, which is in harmony with the world around it."

-- Rabindranath Tagore (My School, 1933)

1. Introduction

The word "education" as explicated in a Google search reveals at least three observations. The first is about its historical invention: in English, the word gained currency in the mid 16th century and has been developing and increasing in use since 1900. The second observation encompasses the modes and sites of receiving the education: it is the process of obtaining or giving systematic instruction in a particular field or subject at a school or university. This definition views education mainly as a formal learning process by professional teaching or training; attaining knowledge at different levels is also considered as the main purpose of schooling. The third observation the vision of education - might be the most important part: an enlightening experience. It goes further by looking into the long-term benefits of receiving education; education comprises a significant part of our lives as it should be a lifelong experience.

Revisiting the definition and the purpose of "education" is necessary; it helps us to know what part of its definition has remained and what was missing. Nowadays, many people go to school because that is the dominant social norm; "education" seemingly refers more to an institution rather than a process or a personal experience. When knowledge and education systems were borrowed, reproduced and gradually commercialized in the global context, people forgot (or even never had an idea about) why they need education, why they want to be educated, and what is an education for. Education can and should be an enlightening experience; however, many people lost in it; especially those who engage uncritically with the process.

For example, in the global South (maybe likewise in the global North), people overemphasize the role of educational institutions, students have to take weekend classes to compete in the tests, parents trust school rankings before evaluating their children's own learning needs and talents, government promotes enrollment expansion in education for different levels, and even, a few individuals with ulterior motives use education to gain personal fame, power, and wealth. Meanwhile, following the social trend, educational institutions put knowledge accumulation/acquisition at the center of classroom learning while letting go of the social functions of education, which pushes the school and university to become the real "ivory tower". This type of education will not help to stimulate students' learning motivations and personal development but instead enlarges gaps between school education and their social competences (including culture, work, interaction, communication and so on).

There is no doubt that education is critical for human development: SDG 4 articulates, "achieving inclusive and quality education for all reaffirms the belief that education is one of the most powerful and proven vehicles for sustainable development." For all concerns mentioned, we still need to ask the questions what can education do to propel sustainable development, and how. Therefore, in this paper, we propose that education requires a broader definition; it should be considered as profoundly related to capacity building, human development, and, most importantly, it should be in service of humanity. Only in this way can we move forward to meaningfully address other challenges, such as poverty, corruption, child labor, pollution, gender issues, and so on. While education is not a panacea for solving these problems, it certainly plays a vital and complex role in advancing the development agenda.

2. Methodology

As stated perspectives and issues in education and development, in this study, we will employ the famous Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) ideology of education as a theoretical framework. Our secondary research method involves sources from various writings of Tagore, and a collation or synthesis of existing research, such as journals, essays, and book chapters written by other scholars who conduct research in the field of education and development. Moreover, this paper will also use a comparative methodology to analyze Tagore's educational philosophy vis-à-vis educational systems, values, and reality in the global South.

The objective of this study is to review and analyze the dominant ideology about how education functions in society nowadays in terms of the development-related issues in the global South. And as part of the inquiry, we need to examine the tension between the contemporary educational values in developing countries, such as China that advocated by the school, the society and the issues in sustainable development concerning morality, human and skill development, gender, environment, and social equity, etc., especially when viewed through Tagore's ideology of education. The main issues in education stem from a unidimensional understanding of the social value and human development. We hope this study can raise further awareness of the ongoing conflicts and offer possible solutions through a critical approach.

3. Tagore's Educational Philosophy and Aims

Rabindranath Tagore was a prominent 20th-century Indian philosopher, who was not only known as a poet but also a social reformer, educator, and practitioner. The contemporary education system in India was firstly borrowed and developed based on the Western ideology. However, the adopted system only enlarged the gaps between the rich and the poor in Indian society, as well as a created conflict between the new class of educated elites and the old values. Tagore saw the social upheaval, who determined to present his alternative philosophies and ask for social reform. After he visited in Santa Barbara in 1917, he sought to make Santiniketan¹ the connecting thread between India and the world [and] a world center for the study of humanity somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography (Ghosh, 2014). Tagore travelled to many countries and areas of the world in his lifetime. Although Tagore himself never wrote a philosophy of education, in particular, his view reflects both Western and Eastern ideologies regarding his experience and depth of sensibility to society and the surroundings, which has significant borrowing meaning for existing systems of education nowadays in the context of globalization.

Tagore claimed that the existing school and university have been operating like "educational factories", and that classroom schooling resembles "parrot's training", where a bird is caged and force-fed textbook pages; knowledge reproduction via classroom learning is dissociated from social contexts; students lack interest (or else the time) to explore ideas, and are instead confined to doing homework and taking tests.

In his opinion, education has “divorced from the streams of life and confined within the four walls of the classroom becomes artificial and losses its value” (Bhattacharjee, 2014, p.35).

Tagore did not consider education only as a means of knowledge learning but also as a tool for connecting and developing individuals with humanity at large. On the contrary, education, to him, is a meaningful way to obtain the freedom of mind and soul. Tagore once said, “education is a permanent part of the adventure of life... it is not like a painful hospital treatment for curing them (students) of the congenial malady of their ignorance, but it is a function of the health, the natural expression of their minds vitality” (Bhattacharjee, 2014, p.35). “Freedom,” “creative self-expression,” and “active communion with nature and mankind” are three key principles of Tagore’s educational philosophy. Although Tagore embraces “individualism” and “naturalism”, he believed that “every one of us the Creator (Brahma) manifests in a unique manner and every individual tries to realize the Creator in his own way through which unity could be found not only amongst human beings but also between men and nature” (Bhattacharjee, 2014, p.34); the keynote of Tagore’s educational philosophy was to realize the unity of human beings ultimately.

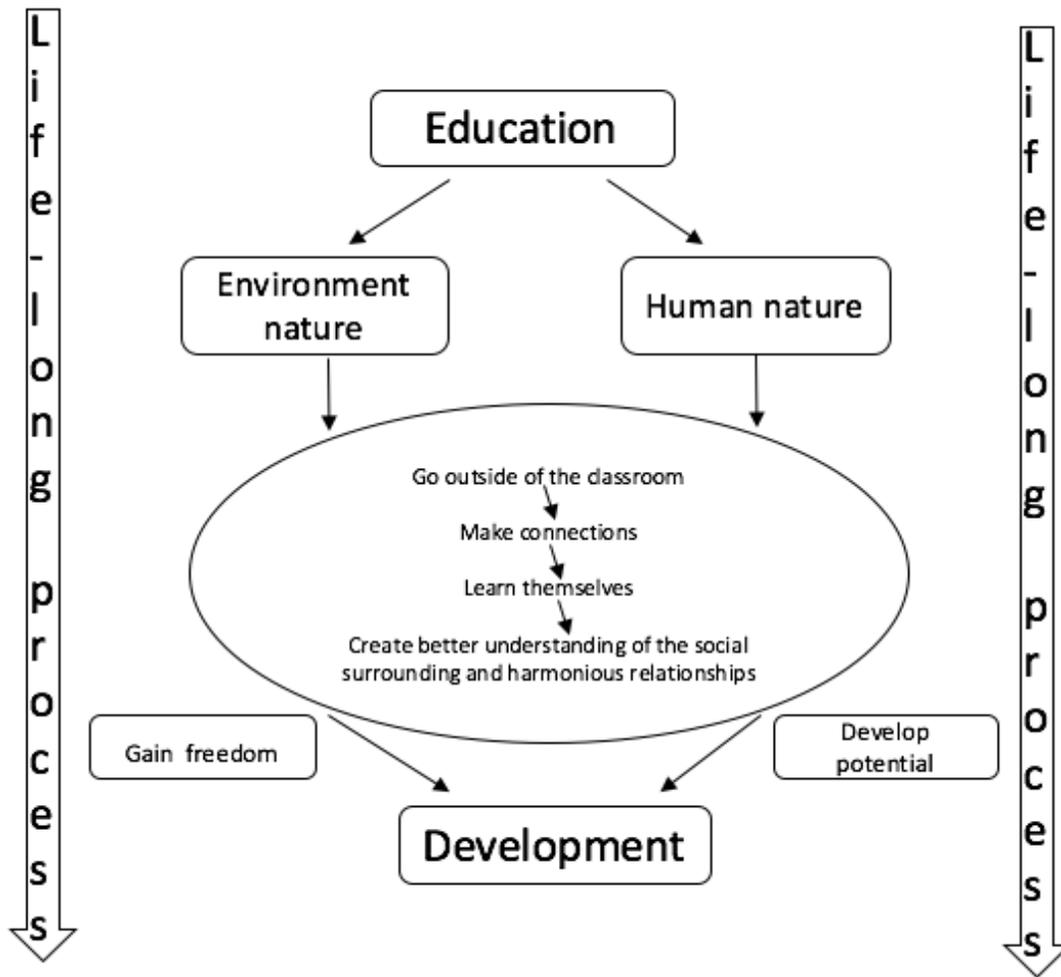
Tagore’s philosophy connects learning to one’s culture, environment, morality, and self-development. He envisioned a good education that should be deeply rooted in one’s culture and social surroundings and also linked to the broader world (Bhattacharjee, 2014). As a traveler and philosopher himself, Tagore believed that education should be the way to relate and to experience the world, to understand and realize oneself and one’s relation to others, such as parents, friends, and strangers (Bhattacharjee, 2014). In other words, Tagore’s concept of society was to “develop the complete man” through education; this can be achieved through interactive activities and exposure to life events. He believed that education is a process that can teach people to “realize their oneness with other individuals of the universe leading to the harmonious development of the personality” (Bhattacharjee, 2014, p.36). This postmodern view towards education and development adopted an open vision that helps the learners fully discover their potential by understanding themselves and their environment.

“If education is not easy and lifelike, social development may be impossible” (Miju, Das & Chowdhury, 2014, p.117), Tagore showed this concern with an anxiety towards modern development in various masterpieces hundred years ago. However, the existing educational systems rely too much on learners’ test scores; there is a tendency to equate high test scores with talent, at the expense of other qualities related to human nature, such as one’s emotions and good senses towards society and one’s surroundings, which should be considered to be as important as one’s intellect.

Another important piece from Tagore was his belief that education was a form of capital that could transform people into human resources; education and technology can help to reduce poverty and enhance living conditions (Rashidan and Kabir, 2002 in Miju, Das & Chowdhury, 2014). Some foreseeable benefits include high productivity of labor, effective utilization of land, commercial exports, awareness of good health, and empowerment of women and so on (Rushidan, 2003 in Miju, Das & Chowdhury, 2014). In Tagore’s philosophy of social development, education is the key to make people awaken, especially at the grassroots level; “when literacy rate increases, inequality of resource distribution is reduced” (Rushidan, 2003 in Miju, Das & Chowdhury, 2014, p.119). When people see education as a powerful tool, it can help them protect their own rights in many ways.

In general, Tagore’s philosophy of society, education, and development is closely related to nature, and there are two horizontal levels of nature: the environment and human nature (see Diagram 3.1.). On the one hand, he encourages the youth to embrace their nature as humankind fully; on the other hand, he also encourages them to go outside of the classroom, make connections with others, and learn and realize the truth of themselves in the natural environment. To Tagore, education should be a way to gain freedom and to fully develop youth potential; only in this way, education can lead to meaningful human and social development, and transfer population into human resources. Moreover, he believed that education should be a lifelong process; youth go to school not because the teachers or the parents want them to learn and be successful, but to develop themselves in terms of creating a better understanding of their social surroundings and harmonious relationships linked to the broader world. From this standpoint, education is a way for empowerment, of different social levels and genders. Most important, Tagore’s philosophy provides alternatives to current developmental model, primarily through the lens of education and its social functions.

Diagram 3.1. From Education to Development: Two Levels of Nature



In the next sessions, we will critically review some education realities in the global South, as well as analyze how Tagore’s philosophy can be used to inspire new ideas for educational agents and policymakers.

4. Two Basic Questions for Education

Education is an integral component of development. For a long time, however, education has been left behind compared to other aspects of development; education in countries and areas in the global South are facing different challenges. As mentioned, education in the global South refers more to an institution rather than a self-motivated learning experience, and the major issues in the education systems include:

- The utilitarianism and instrumentalism of education;
- Teacher-centered teaching and learning in the classroom;
- Inadequate educational resources and pedagogical innovation;
- Knowledge reproduction and lack of critical thinking skills;
- The created gaps between school education and social competences.

For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the schools and universities usually lack qualified teachers, teaching materials, and efficient classroom facilities. In Asian countries such as China, the teaching methods are based on memorizations, which kills the creativity of students. In Latin America such as Columbia, teacher salary is low, the classroom is usually overcrowded, and both public and private schools lack educational resources. To solve these problems, more and more foreign aid has been sent to Africa, educational policymakers in Asia have tried to change policies every year, and teachers in Latin America have gone on strike to ask for equal rights.

Yet, have these problems been solved? Foreign aid to Africa is still not enough, the educational system in China is resilient like a rubber band against reforms, and low teacher salary and oversized classrooms in Columbia are creating more social inequality. Interestingly, the society attempts to solve problems has created more problems.

What can education really do for development? To answer this first question, we should put away the traditional economic perspective towards education and go back to review the social functions of education for development. According to a report of Asian Developmental Bank, the lack of concern towards human development is the greatest weakness of existing development issues (ADB, 1991 in Miju, Das & Chowdhury, 2014). Indeed, “education as technology” (Miju, Das & Chowdhury, 2014, p.117) to promote innovation and technological advancement, is an important way to enable emancipation from heavy labor; this ideology also existed in Tagore’s philosophy. However, by following this type of developmental model for decades, development in the global South merely lies in the concept of economic growth and materialism, emphasizing the creation of more advanced technology, new materials, the exploration of outer space, and so on.

In many developing countries, as the school curriculum put full concentration on math and science subjects, and the universities have concentrated most of their funding in the science and technology sectors, students who have chosen to major in these fields have secured better positions after graduation, compared to those who are in the fields of philosophy, fine arts, and social science. With such a technological “slant” in higher education, college students are graduating with limited knowledge about the history and culture of their own country, are indifferent to social concerns in their society, not to mention events that are happening in this world outside of their field of study.

Although science and technology development greatly contributes to the socio-economic growth that drives the developmental agenda of a country’s economic maturity and independence, education is, after all, about human development; only in this way can we make development sustainable. Asirvatham (1976) once claimed that “man's tragedy is his lack of involvement and concern. He preaches love, but in reality he is a slave to his own egocentric desires, and education is the only alternative to world-wide conflict” (p.3). Therefore, the use of education to inform human development in developing a better world cannot be ignored. Sadly enough, the news in developing countries is largely about how many satellites and spaceships have been sent into space or about how much new funding the government is allocating towards more technological research laboratories. When new machines and technology start to take away jobs from workers, making people feel more unwanted and alienated from their friends and families, who else should we blame? The new technology or their creators? The developmental model or the policymakers? When machines start to make our society less humane, we must then ask the second question: what shall education really do for development?

Friedman, who addressed the importance of international education and cultural exchange, states in his book *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century* (2005) that this era is not built around countries but built around individuals. When education starts to focus on human development, all fragmented knowledge pieces will be connected again and transcend any culture, race, language and other differences created by time and space. This concept echoes Tagore’s philosophy that people need to go outside of the classroom and interact with their surroundings. As alternatives to traditional ways of school learning, both short-term and long-term international exchange programs provide opportunities for young people to interact with each other. In particular, short-term educational and cultural exchange programs encourage young people to go outside, learn different cultures, understand differences between them and appreciate the diversity of the world. Long-term degree programs studies will not only help young people learn new knowledge related to their majors but also help them to master new languages skills, enhance communicative skills and living capabilities. From there, education can facilitate the process of self-actualization and enable individuals and communities to develop the mindsets, attitudes, and capacities that will help younger generations to live with dignity in a highly unequal world.

In this regard, we should advocate education for social sustainability and human development. Again, the purpose of education is not only about creating new inventions but extending knowledge and education into society beyond what can be done through classroom teaching and learning. Bearing this concept in mind, we should encourage countries in the global South to work collaboratively to address similar issues in order to solve the social problems and regional conflicts generated by the rapid development. This also echoes Tagore’s educational advocacy of building world harmony.

5. Conclusion

Nowadays, people in different regions of the world are sharing more similarities in lifestyle, and the international economy is merging together because of the invention of new technologies, the flow of information, increased international cooperation and population shifts that cross national boundaries. However, while people are celebrating these technological achievements, the development of humanity has become secondary.

Balance is not easy to find; imbalanced development will lead to disaster. A hundred years ago, our technological development was limited and we strove towards industrialization. Now, in the 21st century, too rapid industrialization and technological advancement has negatively impacted both our environment and our society, and we need to put a halt to this type of development. Tagore's philosophy of education reminds us that both education and development should be responsible and respectful towards our human nature. When development has started to harm our natural environment as well as affect the understanding of social values (a more narrowed understanding of social value, such as the definitions of wealth, success, and power), seeing the harm that development has and is causing, we should look back and ask ourselves deep inside: why are we developing in the first place?

Social sustainability and human development that respects moral and humanistic development should be put in the center of future education. Education, in this sense, should not focus only on developing more advanced technologies or trying to use machines to solve social issues, such as poverty and inequality. Instead, we should see the whole world as a big developing community; becoming globalized means that there is integration across different cultures, and ideas and products become more readily tangible across nations. Thus, in this regard, we will be able to share resources, exchange developmental ideas and skills, and balance adequate and inadequate facilities within a globally human context.

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