

Open learning and Rabindranath Tagore's idea on mass education: A critical study on *Lokshikkha Samsad*

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Abstract

The ODL system is holistic as it can incorporate multiple learners from various locations compared to conventional education system. In India, the first Asian Noble laureate poet and humanist Rabindranath had a unique idea of mass education long before the establishment of open institutions around the world. He pointed out two directions of education: education of pleasure and education of need. These complex relations have been immensely propagated through the formation of Visva-Bharati University (1916) and Sriniketan. Rabindranath's ideas of education focused on self-respect and self-reliance or 'Palli-punargathan' (resurrection of villages) as well as social ethics.

He proposed a unique education policy to incorporate aged and female learners of remote villages of Bengal in 1936. This was implemented in Visva-Bharati through the newly formed 'Lokshikkha Samsad' (Mass Education Council, 1937). This idea is similar to the open education system today. According to an advertisement published in Visva Bharati University Bulletin (August, 1937), there was a plan for an examination system to accredit knowledge of the margin. The concept of study centre, customisation of exam rules for learners, plan for home-assignment, through postage, were also introduced. The centre targeted aged females who faced difficulties obtaining proper education. Records of who have enrolled and passed show us that this attempt had gained popularity initially. Local Bengali language was used as the medium of instruction. Rabindranath believed that the university is not only a centre for knowledge distribution but also a centre of new knowledge generation. "Lokshikkha Granthamala" (Mass Education Publication Series) was another attempt to expand open learning through Open Education Repository. This publication series was content oriented, well-written and low-priced. It also served as an example of open book system as well as re-pository of knowledge for a university that thought of open learning long before the establishment of open universities around the world.

Introduction

The diversified nature of the Indian state is also another point of argument which needs to be addressed in this changing or expanding educational paradigm. Many developing countries in Africa and Latin America are promoting ODL to enhance the rate of elementary education and higher education. It has evolved in a more pragmatic or empirically viable manner as an alternative way of education expansion in recent times. Nevertheless there are some similarities in the ideas of our great predecessor, the world poet Rabindranath Tagore and in his *Visva Bharati*. In this paper I have attempted to emphasise Rabindranath Tagore's conceptual philosophy on open learning in the context of ODL.

The ODL system was conceptualised in developed countries to cope with exponential social growth. A state, in its benevolent nature of welfare planning, had to address the 'mass' to maintain a smooth rhetoric of democracy. Elementary education as well as higher education were the two important imperatives of developmental parameters that was constantly been analysed in a democratic state structure. Incorporation of larger section of learner into this educational field is proportionately related to socio-political activity of any given state. Thus the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), which in a conventional system is impossible to attain, is very important (Ansari, 2002). It requires more attention in physical infrastructure proportionately related to numerous economic factors. Therefore, the development of open learning may be related to politics on the whole. At this point of argument the hegemony of state might be dominant than the right to acquire knowledge. Open learning has completely revolutionised the idea of limited or squeezed educational paradigm. So nowadays, there is a binary relation of 'usefulness' and 'being used' as far as open learning is concerned in expanding educational context in India.

An open vision of Tagore

In a society, an individual can develop skill and knowledge through rigorous attempts to cope with the challenges of the environment. With this conscious attempt of survival in a given society, an individual shapes his/her own personality. This ever-evolving process of personality, corresponds to one's educational acumen. Rabindranath Tagore pointed out two related directions of education: education of pleasure and education for need. The complex relation between these two directions has been immensely propagated in the idea of *Visva-Bharati* (University) and *Sriniketan*. In a lecture at Oxford ("*Personality*"), Tagore pointed out: 'If the world is taken away, our personality will lose all its contents.' An organic relation between the 'concrete world' and the 'world within' was derived by Tagore. In this relation, 'Man' and 'Nature' are juxtaposed to form human personality. Ideas of education that of self-respect, self-reliance or *Palli-punargathan* (resurrection of Villages) was evolving in his mind at that time.

After the establishment of *Visva-Bharati* University (1916), Rabindranath was involved in shaping abstract ideas of self-respect and self-reliance into reality. He was inspired by the notions of personality and the environment. As the first Asian to receive a Noble-Prize in

Literature in 1913, Tagore practically left no stone unturned to develop his Visva-Bharati. The ‘Nationalism’ debate or questions on social inequality were dealt with an idea of social organic synthesis: one which an individual enjoys a space of his own and creates ‘joy’ in every sphere of activity. He was more concerned with the idea of natural social balance than any organised revolution. This concern matches his ideals in upholding self-reliance of a ‘marginal man’.

He welcomed the idea of ‘activity’ (*Shram*) in elementary education which he had implemented in *Siksa-satra*. But at the same time, he argues for western mode of progressive elementary education (John Dewae) that was advocated by James (1842 – 1914) and Charles Piears (1839 – 1910). He read William James’ book entitled *Talks to Teachers and Students* (1899), which was presented by scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose and discussed with his fellows several times. Rabindranath was influenced by Graham Wallas’ idea of “opportunity for continuous initiative”. ‘Freedom’ was the only milieu where this continuous initiative could take place. In *Siksa-Satra* (July 1924), this freedom of expression was the only quest. Tagore (1924) wrote: “It is only through the fullest development of all his capacities that man is likely to achieve his real freedom”. This is close to Gandhi’s elementary education model.

Azizul Huq, the education minister of undivided Bengal at that time, visited Santiniketan on 10 August 1935 and with his strong initiative and patronage, *Sikkhasaptaha* (Education week) was organised in Calcutta in February 1936. The conference of ‘New Education Fellowship’/ *Nabashikkhasangha* (which was established by Bêtes Ensor in 1921) was also held in Calcutta for the first time. Rabindranath was invited to deliver a lecture at this auspicious occasion. He had a proposal which was printed as an end note to his lecture *Shikkhar Sangikaran (Assimilation of Education)*. In this proposal, he emphatically argued for a new arrangement of examination system for the people of rural Bengal. An open and distance education institution would have evolved at that time if the proposal was not ignored. Tagore started to implement the same plan at Visva-Bharati the following year.

Formation of Lokshikkha Samsad

Lokshikkha Sansad (Mass Education Council, 1937) was Tagore’s outstanding idea through which he tried to spread his educational views to the margin. A model of accreditation of lifelong learning was there. And this ‘margin’ was not only on economic basis but also to reach the unreached and misplaced people. His arguments were very clear in that proposal of February 1936:

I wish to present yet another of my proposals in front of the education department. There are men and women in the country, who for different reasons are deprived from getting a chance to educate themselves; for them, if examination centers are set up in various regional towns, then many may get encouraged to educate themselves in their spare time, sitting at home. If their curriculum is framed in a definite way right from the lower to higher units, then their education can be justly controlled (Tagore, 1936, 28 – 29).

To accredit these deprived human resource, Rabindranath had a concrete plan:

The title that would be endowed upon after the examination would both be socially acclaimed and professionally valued. So it is expected that the expense would be easily met by the money given by the examinees nationwide. Due to this, a greater sphere as far as writing text books are concerned would get opened, thereby increasing the materials to expand education among the masses; and there would be a fair increase in the means of earning a living for many a writers. Once it has risen in my mind to take up this duty as a pledge from Visva-Bharati. But a poor man's wish is wingless beyond his mind. Besides the state governments degree is the director of our life's way (Tagore, 1936, 28–29, translation by author).

In 1925, he delivered a lecture at *Bharatiya Darshan Mahasabha* and illuminated the unparalleled procedure of mass-education in Middle-age literature and music. He saw the influence of mass education system of India. There was no president, no secretary or treasury of fund. Year after year, men and women participated and created a space for his/her own pleasure and quality of creativity. Tagore argues for the inner vitality of such kind of traditional Indian education system:

It may be my bias as an artist, but education seems to me essentially an art whose problem we solve not by discussing system but by discovering creative sources of inspiration. When this source is a human one it dwells on a teacher who is ever a student and therefore through whom a perennial intellectual eagerness acts as a dynamic force spreading in its surroundings a disinterested impulse for knowledge (Kumar, 1996, 814).

The model of education that spreads beyond institutional boundaries was always advocated by Tagore. *Perennial intellectual eagerness* which acted as a 'dynamic force' was the key focus of the conventional system of education. In an open system, this has to be considered because there is no direct teacher-student relation. Therefore, to accredit the creativity of marginal people is to accredit the dynamic force or vitality of unreached learners.

Breaking the barrier

To shape this idea, Tagore formed *Lokshikkha Samsad* (Mass Education Council) at Visva Bharati in 1937 (Visva-Bharati Bulletin, 1937). His primary aim was to reach the people who were beyond institutional educational ambit. The idea of *Lokshikkha Samsad* evolved in his mind after he critically analysed the limitations of conventional education system. Tagore realised the crux of the problem for social development was expansion of education which was not possible through school or college education only. The aim of self-reliance can only be achieved through vertical and horizontal expansion and that can only be possible if informal education goes beyond formal territory of institutional education. People have innumerable set of skills and knowledge in their lives. The open approach to education should incorporate

these everyday knowledge and skills to form a better social equilibrium. Tagore had an idea to open all barriers of education to everyone. In *Lokshikkha Samsad*, a pattern of today's open learning institution was observed long before the establishment of any open universities in the world. The study centre concept has been introduced to develop non-conventional mode of teaching. There was increasing number of study centres across the state in pre-independent Bengal annually.

Year	No. of Centre
1941	11
1942	64
1943	109
1949	146
1952	159

Source: Visva-Bharati Annual Reports

It shows that this kind of approach had gained momentum initially and learners have taken interest in it.

The detailed advertisement of examination that was published in Visva-Bharati Bulletin (University Bulletin) on 23 August, 1937, in which we see a 'Three part' course and examination given:

Level of examination and learning subject
<p>There would be three parts of Examination First: Adya(Primary) Second: MiddleTerm(Madhya) Third: Degree (Upadhi)</p>
<p>One is entitled to sit for the Degree examination if he/she gets through the First and the Second (Examination)</p>
<p>Subjects for the Primary : Bengali Language & Literature, History, Indian Administration & General Knowledge, Arithmetic, Science, Geography, Health & Hygiene , Home Science</p>
<p>Subjects for the Middle Term: Language & Literature, Science, History, Geography, Cultural education</p>
<p>Subjects for Degree (Upadhi): Language & Literature, History, Cultural education</p>
<p>Presently we have been able to make arrangements to conduct the Primary level of Examination. A detailed reading list is provided later. The reading list for the Middle & Degree Examination would be published later.</p>

EXAMINATION RULES

1. Exams to be conducted in the month of December every year in different centers of Bengal. Name of the centers and examination dates would be notified beforehand.
2. Language: **Examination would be conducted in Bengali.** Spelling rules as approved by the University of Calcutta and Rabindranath is preferable.
3. Certificate: Examination can be given on all subjects altogether or one subject or more than one subjects at a time.

After passing all the subjects certificate would be given.

4. Entrance Fee: For all subjects- Rs 6 and per subject Rs 2.
Entrance fee must be sent by 30th September to The Registrar, Visva-Bharati.
5. **Division for the passed candidates:** No number would be given in answer sheets. Only whether the examinee is Good, Medium or Unsuitable would be mentioned. Candidate unsuitable for any subject can sit for the test again.
6. Qualification of the examinee: Any man or woman is entitled to sit for the Exam. **NO AGE BAR.**
7. Time to answer: 3hrs
8. **Centre can be opened at any place with 20 or more examinees.**
9. **Any queries regarding study subject would be answered but in that case postage stamp should be sent.**

(A comprehensive syllabus, detail text book list, paper wise marks distribution and syllabus were attached with the advertisement.)

We have only translated a portion of that advertisement which depicts the nature of open university examination system today. Age is not a determining factor to sit for the exam, which goes with the very essence of open learning. Restriction of passing the examination was also customised for the benefit of the learner. They may choose the option to sit for the test but learning subjects and topics should not be downsized or cut off. Besides that, supplementary exam, project papers were there. Guidance to the learners were given by checking assignment scripts through postage as well.

After his departure in 1940, this project gained momentum as *Sriniketan* was the centre of *Lokshikkha Samsad*. Specially, aged female learners were interested in pursuing different courses through *Lok Shikkha Samsad*. Learner enrollment and examinee appeared/passed record (mentioned hereunder) shows us a considerable growth of the project in few years.

Primary Level Learner	1947	1948	1949	1950
Enrolled	265	287	360	413
Appeared in exam	140	171	228	259
Passed	71	82	120	127
College Level Learner	1947	1948	1949	1950
Enrolled	577	626	626	571
Appeared	286	308	339	341
Passed	165	178	221	206

Source: Visva-Bharati Annual Reports 1952

However, enrollment ratio and activity was affected by the Bengal-Partition as Lokshikkha-Samsad could not manage many study centres situated in East-Bengal. Furthermore, based on a notification circulated by Visva-Bharati authorities in 1969, the degree of Lokshikkha Samsad can be only used in finding jobs and not for pursuing higher education (Visva-Bharati, 1969). There were debates to accept an open learning methodology that empowers people who did not receive formal education. On the other hand, vocational training was not given much attention due to lack of industrial development and poor socio-economic scenario. The urban middle class of Bengal had a notion that life without an institutional degree is not an achievement. Three hundred years of colonial British education system had changed the orientation of indigenous mass education system of the country. Tagore was aware of that and he tried experimenting on a learner-centric model in which is flexible yet provides quality education. Tagore's idea of self-reliance can also be linked to this context. As he has not received any formal/institutional education, he knows rural Bengal and the villagers who are in need of basic education, especially the women. This was his central idea at that time.

Open repository: Creating new path

Lokshikkha Granthamala (Mass Education Publication Series) was another remarkable attempt by Tagore to expand open education. In this series, the first five publications have been published under the supervision of Tagore. The main objective of this publication, as expressed in his preface that was printed on the back-cover of each title:

We have taken up the responsibility of publishing the text books for 'Lokshikkha' in phases. The objective of this endeavor is to spread the learning materials to the common masses of Bengal. So, accordingly it is our lookout that the language remains simple, void of and definitive terms, moreover there remains no poorness as far as written matters are concerned — is too our concern. Often most people do not have the good fortune of getting a chance to cross over the difficult terrains of education: it being both expensive and time consuming. Thus the light of knowledge brightens up only a narrow strip of our country. Never can a country, bowed down with a burden of ignorance, move forward to the path of liberty. So it is our duty, in its earnest, to unburden and that too in an easier and quicker way. Stories and poems had spread across on the wings of Bengali language but there remain chances of nurturing weak imaginative prowess and laxness of character among the uneducated and sub-educated masses. To combat that a comprehensive education system is immediately essential (Tagore, 1948, back cover, translation by author).

It is worth to note that the point of argument made by Tagore is similar to the objective of open learning today. He was critical about the “imaginative prowess and laxness of character” of a common man. We all know his likings for invocation of self-power and self-will within man itself through education. *Lokshikkha* was also an attempt to expand social empowerment at that time. A time, when the post was the only way to reach people living in distant cities or villages i.e., when the communication process were limited, Tagore developed the idea of producing distance learning study material. *Prithwi-Parichay* and *Ahar O Aharja* were the first two publications in which Tagore's foreword have been attached. The publication of *Viswavidyasangraha* (published after two years of his death) and *Lokshikkha Granthamala* were complementary to each other. At least 19 such publications have been made by Visva-Bharati. If we go through the list of publications of these Mass Education Publication Series, we can see how serious subjects and topics have been discussed.

Name of the material/books	Writer	Published by <i>Lokshikkha Samsad or Biswa Vidya Prakashan</i>
<i>Bangla Kavya Parichay</i>	Rabindranath Tagore;	1938
<i>Pather Sanchay</i>	do	1936
<i>Biswaparichay</i>	do	1937

<i>Prachin Hindustan:</i>	Pramatha Choudhury	1936
<i>Biswamanaber Laxmilabh</i>	Surendrnath Thakur	1940
<i>Prithwi-Parichay</i>	Pramathanath Sengupta	1940
<i>Ahar O Aharja</i>	Pashupati Bhattacharya	1937
<i>Prantattwa</i>	Rathindranath Thakur	1941
<i>Banglasahityer Katha:</i>	Nityananda Binod Goswami	1942
<i>Bharater Bhasha o Bhasha Samasya:</i>	SunitiKumar Chattopadhyay	1944
<i>Bangla Upannyas:</i>	Srikumar Bandopadhyay	1947
<i>Bharat-Darshan-Sar:</i>	Umeshchandra Bhattacharya	1949
<i>Hindu Samajer Garan</i>	Nirmal kumar Basu	1949
<i>Padartha Vidyar Nabajug</i>	(not mentioned)	1951
<i>Puja parban</i>	Jogeshgchandra Ray	1952
<i>Hu-en-Sang</i>	Stayandranath Basu	1952
<i>Banglar Nabyo Sanskriti:</i>	Jogeshchandra Bagal	1951
<i>Itihas</i>	Rabindranath Tagore	1955
<i>Badyer Parajay</i>	Charuchandra Bhattacharya	1949

Source: Majumdar, 2011, 201

The above mentioned writers were some of the most influential intellectuals of that time in Bengal. Tagore planned this project in such a way that they all have contributed their best efforts to make it a success. A kind of idea parallel to today's open book system or open repository of knowledge might have evolved in his belief of strong affection for Bengali as a medium of instruction at basic or higher level of education. Not only these books were written in lucid language but also the price (50 paise to 4 Rupees) was very much affordable and within everybody's reach. Though all the above mentioned publications were for the common people, the academic quality has never been undermined at all. We may accept this initiative as a kind of open book system in today's ODL paradigm.

Tagore believed that the university is not only the centre for knowledge production but also for knowledge distribution. In the last phase of his educational related understanding (i.e., 1933 – 1940, as Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (1994) argues, he has a shift on that. He not only talked about the role of the university in providing good education and also being the centre of knowledge in the society. So the people's involvement with the university becomes more vibrant. In Sriniketan and *Lakshikha Samsad*, this kind of emanation of education took a natural flight. Today, in most open universities in India, this type of knowledge production has been forgotten. Presently, universities focus more on the methodologies of mass education and not knowledge production. Moreover, by imitating the western model of open-learning in the name of information technology, basically hegemonies is the real problem of education expansion.

An open university has to establish its competence in producing and sharing of knowledge to become the centre of the society it develops. Methodology development is important but that is not the only task for a university to succeed. In order to overcome colonial hegemony, an open university has to work hard for greater national interest to be the centre of knowledge for the people in India.

Conclusion

In today's globalised educational paradigm, the idea of Tagore's mass education through distance learning raises the issue of humanitarian ethics on the whole as far as social development is concerned. Probably it is one of the oldest empirical model of an university promoting open learning in the world. The value judgment or openness of open education is constantly being challenged in the cotemporary world in terms of imposed colonial language, recognition of degrees and in socio-political power centrism. These matters have become a barrier for expansion of education in India. Horizontal social mobility booms up in such a way that it sometime negates the idea of vertical expansion of the society. The idea of our great predecessor is not only relevant in establishing the rich heritage of open learning but also to propagate a sort of serious indigenous value or ethical mode in these initiatives.

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