

Rabindranath Tagore's Views on Female Education as Expressed in His Non-Fictional Writing

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) wrote about female education across a long career of essays, letters, and speeches, and his views on the subject shifted considerably over time and remain internally inconsistent. This paper traces those views through Tagore's non-fictional writing, situating them against the social and familial context in which they were formed: the female-education movement in nineteenth-century Bengal, the education (and lack of it) received by the women of Tagore's own family, and the administrative choices Tagore made as an educator at Shantiniketan and Visva-Bharati. Reading Tagore's essays, letters, and reported remarks in roughly chronological order shows a writer who moved between liberal and conservative positions - supporting women's literacy and access to English while resisting public examinations, paid work, and claims to equal creative or intellectual capacity - and who, even in old age, continued to frame women's education chiefly around the goal of producing better wives and mothers rather than intellectually autonomous individuals. The paper argues that Tagore is best understood, in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's phrase, as a moderate: reformist relative to his conservative contemporaries, but persistently ambivalent toward educated women of talent, including those within his own family.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, female education, Shantiniketan, Visva-Bharati, gender and colonial Bengal, women's education history

Introduction

Belonging to a time when female education was a vital concern, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) showed a considerable understanding of women's urge for education in both fictional and non-fictional writing although he believed in gender-specific curriculum for his school. Before allowing female students at Path-bhavan at Shantiniketan in 1908, Tagore preferred home-schooling for women. Eventually, Visva-Bharati was established in 1921 where co-education was offered. Still, he believed in gender-based education at school-level. However, he had infamously shown scant reverence to academically or formally educated women in his family and society. The

present paper will look closely at Tagore's non-fictional writings like essays, letters, and speeches to explore his views on female education that influenced his representation of women in fiction. Since a person is the product of his time the following sections will highlight some major ideas regarding female education and educated women in Tagore's time.

Social Background

The female education movement in the 19th century got serious attention from many great Indians. Among them Raja Rammohun Roy (1774-1833) was the first to advocate the introduction of Western education in India and further Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1832-1859) extended the promotion to female education. The colonial government supported female education on the ground that it wanted the Indian civil servants to be married to educated wives so that those officers did not have to face the psychological trauma of an incompatible conjugal life. In Bengal, the educated woman or the New Woman (*Bhadra-mahila*) was supposed to be the ideal companion to the enlightened man or the New Man (*Bhadra-lok*) since the new concept of womanhood was a fine blending of the self-sacrificing wife and the Victorian helpmate.

However, some enlightened men were against educating women. For example, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), addressed educated Bengali women as *Nabina* (New) and pointed out some faults with them. He believed "Their main fault is their idleness. They are tremendously affected and superfluous, suffering from narcissism." (Chattopadhyay, 1884, p. 220). On the contrary, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), a most prominent figure of Tagore's time, supported education for women and wanted women to learn English. He did not encourage mere bookish knowledge, rather believed that education should help women build up a character and remain chaste. Education, thus, far from being an emancipator, further confined women to idealized domestic roles as good wives and better mothers.

In addition, due to the growing nationalism in colonial India, reformist movement gave way to the prioritization of Hindu tradition through various iconic representations of the nation. Thus, the Hindu woman became an ideal emblem of the moral order that symbolized the spirit of India, supposedly uncontaminated by the polluting influence of the West. Along with the Hindu thinkers, some Muslim thinkers were also concerned with conserving the tradition of Islam. Perween Hasan observes that Maulana Thanwi (1863-1943), Tagore's contemporary Muslim intellectual leader, meant the *Beheshti Zewar* (1905) to be given to a child right after she had finished reading the *Holy Quran*. Hasan notes that "the book becomes an important document of contemporary social history" (Hasan, 1994 p.103). She points out the fact that because the invasion of the 'outside', Thanwi made a serious attempt to protect the home or the realm of women from the intrusion of Western culture. Thus, both Hindu and Muslim women were restricted from academic education which ensured their confinement to home education.

At this point, it is imperative to see what the educated women of that period said about their condition. Ruquaiya Sakhawat Hussain (1880-1932) wrote, "The state of the education of women

in India has for long centuries been deplorable” (Hussain, p.25). The statement clarifies that colonial period has robbed women of the intellectual freedom. The state of female education of that time can also be known from Sufia Kamal (1911-1999)’s memoir, “At that time to write Bengali was an offense on part of Muslim women from respectable families” (Kamal, 1988, p.33). The aforesaid quote also expresses the same feeling; that women were craving for education.

Familial Background

Apart from the social influence, Tagore’s family atmosphere should also be considered since this also contributes to his views on female education. In fact, the practice of providing education to women started in the Tagore family when his grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846) was a little child. At that time the women of his family began to be tutored by female *Vaishnavi* devotees. Deb also informs that Tagore’s mother Sarada Devi also received some education from the female devotees who taught her to read *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Sarada was also taught to write letters on banana-leaves.

Sarada’s eldest daughter Saudamini Devi (1847-1920) played a pivotal role in the commencement of female education in then Calcutta. Saudamini went to Bethune (established in 1849) in July 1851. Saudamini’s sister Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932) was also a well-versed, widely-recognized fiction writer. Even Tagore’s wife Mrinalini Devi (1873-1902) went to Loreto House (established in 1842) in 1884 with his brother Hemendranath Tagore’s daughters. It was the Maharshi’s (1817-1905) wish that Mrinalini should go to Loreto. Moreover, Swarnakumari’s daughter, Sarala Devi Choudhurani’s (1872-1945) was well educated and the first woman from the family to go to Mysore for work. Tagore’s sister-in-law Jnanadanandini Devi’s daughter Indira Devi Choudhurani (1873-1960) also received extra-ordinary education at Auckland House in Simla, the Loreto Convent in Calcutta and graduated from Kolkata University with a first-class honor in French.

However, Tagore’s daughters were brought up in home-schooling education system taught by selected tutors. Tagore’s eldest daughter Madhurilata (1886-1918) was taught music, literature, even books of nursing. Classics like *Shakuntala*, *Manu-Samhita*, *Vishnu Purana* were included in her syllabus. The poet also gave her Bankimchandra’s novels to read. However, their lack of formal schooling is still an issue of research and debate. In fact, almost no information is found about his second daughter Renuka (1891-1903) and the youngest daughter Mira Devi’s (1894-1969) home-schooling. From Mira Tagore’s memoir we learn that Renuka was an introvert, bookworm and little stubborn whose personality, the poet failed to understand and hurriedly married her off. Mira Devi wrote, “All girls are not born for a typical household. Rani di [sister] was such a one. If father would educate her instead of marrying her off at an early age, it would be better. Rani di used to read most of the time. But no teacher came to teach her” (Devi, 1975, p.12). The negligence and incomprehensibility on the part of Tagore is understood if one notices his sudden engrossment in reformist movement at that time. Deb also informs us that in an 1901 letter, Tagore attempted to discourage Sahana Devi (his nephew Balendranath Tagore’s young widow) from studying science.

He wrote to her, “Our school has science courses but they include laboratory activities for which you have to come in front of other men, will it be right?” (Deb, 2007, p. 146). It is understandable that both the influence of his father and impact of his involvement in reformist movement contribute to the narrowness of thought displayed in the aforementioned letter.

In addition, Tagore kept a very low esteem of women’s creative faculty in general and Swarnakumari Devi’s merit as a writer in particular. In his letter (from England) to Indira Devi dated 6 May 1913 Tagore wrote, “My elder sister has sent me her translation of her novel *The Flower Garland*. If she could see the literary marketplace here [England], she would understand why such writing will never work here” (Dutta and Robinson, 2005 p. 119). In another letter written to William Rothenstein in February 1914, Tagore continued expressing his disapproval of his sister’s literary worth in much derogatory language:

My sister Mrs. Ghosal who is an author...I have given her no encouragement but... It is likely that she may go to England and use my name and you may meet her but be merciful to her and never let her harbor in her mind any illusion about her worth and her chance. (Dutta and Robinson, 2005 p.141)

The above-mentioned statement does not express merely Tagore’s view of his sister’s creative potential but the general patriarchal point of view of the time. An enlightening and relevant observation comes from Rukmini Devi Arundale who opined, “In the home, he elevated Indian woman for whom he had great regard ...he had far greater admiration for the unsophisticated and *uneducated* woman than for the modern girls” (Arundale, 1961 p.75). The remark is evident in Tagore’s fictional world as well.

Views Expressed in non-fictional writing

In the course of his long writing career, Tagore’s views on female education evolved to the extent of self-contradiction. A close reading of his non-fictional writing reveals his ambiguous attitude to the issue. The young Tagore, informed by his exposure in England, articulated liberal understandings on female education. However, he was against women’s sitting for any public examination or competing with men in any field of life. His earlier understanding of female education is reflected in his following statement published in *Balak* in 1884, “These days our women are enthusiast to sit for examinations...I understand women’s need for education, but I do not understand why do they need to sit for examination...if they appear in public battle field to prove their worth for public for fame, the rare beauty of their heart is lost” (Mukhopadhyay, 2007 p. 74). The statement proves his belief that women’s stepping into man’s world will distort the exquisiteness of women’s heart.

Later, Tagore’s views became more chauvinist which are well reflected in his letter written in response to the lecture of Pandita Rama Bai (1858-1922) in 1889 mentioned by Tagore’s biographer Prashanta Pal. Though the incident was not directly related to education it expressed Tagore’s disbelief in gender equality which reflects his views on education. The lecture caused

huge outrage among the men present there because she said, “Women are equal to men in all respects except for drinking alcohol” (Pal, p. 118.). Tagore wrote in that often-quoted letter, “If women are equal to men in all respects, then almighty has done much injustice to menfolk” (Tagore, 2008, p.678). Further, he stated that women are less intelligent than men and only passing exam does not make women intellectually equal to men, in other words. Chandrava Chakravarty and Sneha Kar Chaudhary argue, “Despite Tagore’s relentless effort to understand the ‘feminine’, the gap between idealization and actuality had remained irreconcilable” (Chakravarty and Chaudhary, 2017 p.15). The aforesaid letter also proves that Tagore did not believe in women’s capability of working outside home or doing the ‘men’s job’ because of their physical vulnerability. Nonetheless, his patriarchal views were refuted by Swarnakumari in the following words, “She (Rama Bai) has proposed equality of the genders regarding education...I do not understand how the letter writer [Tagore] did assume that women have no creativity” (Mukhapadhyay, p. 84), which sounds very rational and courageous on a female writer’s part.

Later, at the age of thirty Tagore became considerably conservative and sturdily opposed Krishnabhamini Das’s essay “Shikkhita Nari”/ “The Educated Woman” (1898) where Das wanted to demonstrate that educated women of her country (India) could also earn money from respectable jobs and be independent like the women of Europe and America. Tagore censured her in the *Sadhana* replying, “The one who is bound by nature to be a mother, her education is not to be sold in market” (Mukhapadhyay, 2007, p.82). In response, Das writes in *Shahitya*, “In the name of Nature men have always been righteously dominated women. Whenever they [men] hear voice about women’s freedom and education, they point out the natural weakness [physical] of women” (Mukhapadhyay, 2007 p.83). However, Tagore reacted to this essay in following words, “I think, instead of being over-conscious about the superiority of their class [women], if they keep imparting their duty without much fuss, that will be more appreciable” (Mukhapadhyay, 2007 p.84). He further declared - women can be great by being only women rather than interfering in men’s job.

In *She Nahi Nahi*, Sutapa Bhattacharya makes a study of Tagore’s book reviews in *Bharati* in 1898 where his views on female education are depicted. In reviewing Hemalata Devi’s *Bharatbarsher Itihas (History of India)* Tagore wrote, “Our opinion is that- mothers, aunts, sisters are liable for children’s tutoring up to a certain age; this is their main responsibility. To teach the children is the chief motto of their [women’s] acquiring education” (Bhattacharya, p. 109). Thus, Tagore visibly associated women’s need for education solely with their role of mother or female guardian. Another contemporary review that Bhattacharya mentions is of Shyamacharan Dey’s book *Susrusha (Nursing)* where the reviewer wrote, “The book should be included in school curricula and every girl should read it...these days excessive load of study and competitive examinations have caused the men prone to sickness...if women know the art of nursing, that would be useful...” (Bhattacharya, p. 109). So, Tagore emphasized on women’s role of nurse in family, in other words, her ability to serve family. Further he added, If women too start studying till late night and joining the race of examination, their delicate body with wither and Universities

may win but our nation will lose beauty and health will. Through this narrow view Tagore, in fact, was uttering the words of the reformists he had joined at the end of the century.

After winning the Nobel Prize 1913, Tagore is expected to be more liberal regarding female education but we find almost the reverse in some cases. The mature Tagore's opinion on female education is nowhere so vividly articulated as in "Stree Shiksha", anthologized in Rabindra Rachanavali VOL: XVI. He wrote this essay in response to a letter from Leela Mitra who complained that, "A group of men forbids women's education on the ground that educated women will not worship their husband; another group prescribes education for women so that they can be a proper mate to their educated husband...both of the groups are selfish as none prioritizes what women really need- education that will enlighten them" (Tagore, 1915, p.286). In response to this rational demand for education Tagore prescribed gender-based education for women, "It is blasphemous to claim that there will be no difference between the educational curriculum for men and women. To preserve their [women's] femininity a distinct gendered training is quintessential" (Tagore, 1915, p.286). Therefore, the mature Tagore had visibly supported female education on the ground of making a class of enlightened mothers because to him, 'mother' was the supreme image.

In this juncture, it is imperative to highlight some of Tagore's thoughts on women's role in family and society since his views on female education are part of his perspectives on their roles. During his trip to USA in 1916, Tagore expressed many of his thoughts concerning Indian women's part in family and society which were thoroughly traditional and occasionally chauvinist. In "Woman and Home" he announced, "From the beginning of our society, women have naturally accepted the training which imparts to their life and to their home a spirit of harmony. It is their instinct to perform their services in such a manner that these, through beauty, might be raised from the domain of slavery to the realm of grace" (Tagore, 1916, p.183). In addition, he denies the fact that women have played a vital role in creating the civilization. Even at the age of sixty-three he claimed, "Literature, art, scientific inventions, philosophy, religion- the combination of which we call civilization, is the creation of men" (Tagore, 1923 p.458,), keeping women out of history and politics. So, even in the mature phase of his life, Tagore kept maintaining his tradition-bound approaches to women's roles in family and society which is reflected on his views on female education.

However, in "Nari"/ "Woman" he admits the fact that the world is heading towards gender equality. He wrote, "Let the call of the new age enter into hearts of our women and wipe out the roots of age-old customs and tradition" (Tagore, 1936 p.197). Here lies the power of Tagore who, once propagated custom, was now welcoming change. He observed how the home-confined women are becoming women of the world and took the revolution positively saying, "Today women throughout the world are crossing the threshold of the home and stepping in wider platforms" (Tagore, 1936, p. 196). In this essay, Tagore admitted the fact that the question of female education had long been denied and men who themselves broke traditions forced women to hold on it. He accepts, "Illiteracy is the worst shame for today's women" (Tagore, 1936, p. 196).

Still, he pronounced stereotypical statement like, “Obedience is a natural instinct of women” (Tagore, 1936, p.194), a comment that contradicts the liberalism articulated in the essay.

Further, in his 80s, Tagore continued his belief that no woman could produce great creative works the way men do. Rani Chanda quotes the Bard, “After all, it must be admitted that men’s build is different from women’s. Men’s brain and physical strength are more superior. Say, If I were my na’didi [Swarnakumari] would I be able to come up with this present status of mine? Let alone the social barriers, women’s brain can never work this much” (Chanda, 1938 p.41). So, the young Tagore’s attitude to talented women did not change much even in his old age. He uttered similar kind of words to Maitreyee Devi during his stay at Mangpu in-between 1938-1940. Devi’s memoir mentions Tagore’s following statement, “You [women] are fortunate enough to pass life with your sweet smile and gentle voice, saying, ‘please eat this, drink that’ but men have to pass B.A., write, join Congress, face chaos” (Devi, 1941, p.75). It is noticeable that by this time many women from his family had already passed B.A., joined Congress, worked outside home and visited U.S.A for lecture trip.

Tagore and Shantiniketan

Now, we will consider Tagore’s views on female education in his school at Shantiniketan and Visva-Bharati. Tagore established the Brahmacharya School at Shantiniketan in 1901 which was exclusively for boys till 1907. After 1907 he got rid of his reformist fervor fully and female students were allowed to get admitted since 1908. Then on, Tagore continued promoting female education. The establishment of ‘*Nari-Bhavana*’, (the female residence) at Visva- Bharati was an important step in this respect. It is a well-known fact that Tagore sold a considerable portion of his library to collect fund for it. However, co-education was not introduced until Visva-Bharati was established (1921).

Apart from developing the infra-structure, Tagore was concerned with the holistic growth of the female students at school. Tagore brought a dance teacher from Banaras to train the girls. Besides receiving the same education as boys, the girls were offered special classes on cooking and nursing taken by the American nurse Gretchen Green. As he believed in a holistic approach to education for the girls, he made it compulsory for them to involve into physical education. They were trained to hike, taken to excursions, oriented to different games, and self-defence skill like Ju-jitsu. He invited Takagaki, a famous Japanese Ju-jitsu master, whom he met during his stay in Japan. Tagore’s earnest wish was to make the students, especially the female students, learn the Japanese way of a defence so that the girls could protect themselves in case of necessity. It is comprehensible that his travelling to Europe, America and Japan contributed to the gradual change in his mind regarding female education.

From Siddika Mahmuda’s research on Tagore’s idea of education, we learn that in his letter to his son Rathindranath Tagore (1888-1961) in 1916, he expressed keen interest in promoting female education. She quotes from Tagore’s aforesaid letter, “I wish to set a quality girls’ school

in the house of Surul” (Mahmuda, 1996, p.86) and argues that though the first girls’ school was established in Shantiniketan in 1908, Tagore was aiming at a better one. Another letter she mentions was written to his secretary Amiya Chakravarty (1901-1986) on 21st February, 1929 where Tagore expressed his dream that the women’s wing of the *asram* would flourish someday and take the shape of a woman’s university. Mahmuda also informs us that when the Mahatma (1869-1948) was against women’s learning English, Tagore was for it, and as its evidence Mahmuda mentions Tagore’s letter to Jaganananda Rai (1869-1933) in 1920 where women’s need for learning English was emphasized. However, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) considered that, the education system in Shantiniketan was much traditional and it would come up merely building a bunch of typical Indian girls. He wrote to Tagore’s secretary, Anil Chanda (between 1934-35), “My own ideas of education are rather peculiar ...I dislike the education which prepares a girl to play a part in the drawing room and nowhere else” (Frank, 2005, p.87). It is relevant to mention that Nehru’s daughter Indira studied at Shantiniketan from 1934-1935.

Conclusion

Critics and historians consider Tagore to be moderately modern in relation to the woman’s questions. According to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “The moderates, like Tagore had wanted the Indian nation to develop through a modernistic course; but modernism being a Western concept, this meant an advocacy of the continuation of colonial rule. The extremists, on the other hand, sought to oppose colonial rule and therefore had to talk in terms of a non-Western paradigm” (Bandyopadhyay, 2009, p. 251). It is also evident in his correspondence to educated women of his time. However, by the end of his life Tagore changed his attitude to educated women which were previously heavily coded by biological deterministic approach. A significant point to notice is Tagore still maintained an ambivalent attitude to the New Women and particularly, women of talent. Either he kept silence about them (Ruquaiya) or he harshly criticize their motion (Rama Bai, Krishnabhabini). We are surprised at his negligence towards even women of talent in his family (Swarnakumari and her daughter Sarala). However, the women of Tagore’s time never ceased to try to break through the stereotype imposed on them and prove their worth though he was not liberal enough to accept all of their moves.

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