

Editorial Comments

Samrat Sengupta

In the present issue of *Sanglap*, we are publishing the essay “Vidyar Jachai” by Rabindranath Tagore from his collection of reflections on the state of education in Bengal titled *Siksha*. Translating this essay in a journal titled *Sanglap* (which means dialogue) holds enormous significance not only by its content but also as a critical reflection on the ambiguous relationship between colonial pedagogy and the act of translating cultures and Dr. Saptaparna Roy has carefully chosen the essay and undertaken this challenging work. Critical discourses have always functioned upon the clearing of ambiguity but are also built upon ambiguity itself, particularly when it creates contradictions and liminality in different cultural spaces. On one hand, translation engages in a dialogue, but it also announces a failure of conversations. Tagore’s present essay focuses on the colonial mimicry of the western knowledge paradigm in Bengal. While in postcolonial scholarship, such discussion has become a cliché, there are some salient points made by Tagore that demand attention. While the essay written in 1919 can be cited as an antecedent to the major anti-colonial pedagogues like Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, or N’gugi wa Thiongo, the work written in Bengali primarily addresses the second or third generation English-educated natives of Bengal – the foster grandchildren of T. B. Macaulay, who introduced English education en masse in Bengal. It does not obsessively discard the relevance of reading English writers and thinkers but becomes suspicious of our ways of reading them. The essay is a commentary on syllabus making and framing of knowledge rather than a polarisation along the East-West binary. The strategies of reading and dissemination of knowledge through a framework adopted from the West is something that Tagore proposes to reconsider. Unlike veteran nationalists like M. K. Gandhi or Bal Gangadhar Tilak, he was not proposing an outright rejection of Western epistemology for a purely “Indian” one but harping on the necessity of a strategy of reception where “wherever the material is sought, the responsibility to examine is in one’s own hand.”

The translation of this essay in the present moment is an act of writing back to the postcolonial debates on pedagogy and knowledge system, which, even in its act of rage against the worlding of the critical discourse by the erstwhile colonies, adopts a framework born and cultivated in the west. The word “jachai” in the original title of the essay means testing and possibly suggests the intellectual framework derived from the west for testing knowledge. But “jachai” may also mean verification, and Tagore tries to verify the colonial episteme itself in the essay. The essay connects with Tagore’s well-known text “Totakahini” or “The Parrot Story,” where an average Bengali learner in the colonised education system is described as a parrot who is tutored to mimic what is being said by the pedagogue. We have been “practicing handwriting by tracing on a specimen script,” and that causes an intellectual failure. The essay can continue the critical dialogue on colonial pedagogy in the present moment by understanding the ways of adopting critical discourses from the west in the Indian classroom without considering the historical and political situatedness. In the age of AI and ChatGPT, knowledge becomes anything that has greater visibility and archiving and is controlled largely by countries with better economic and cultural resources, and we still feel the need to ask, like Tagore – “but will this be how things turn out forever?”

“The Test of Knowledge” (1919)

Rabindranath Tagore

[Translated by Saptaparna Roy]

I remember I knew someone in my childhood who was an exceptional master of English; he was the student of the last phase of the first epoch of English education in Bengal.¹ He had received lessons from Derozio and others. I don't know what thoughts passed his mind when he wanted to advise us on English literature for a few days. He had fixated a classified list of English poets in his mind. In it, the first, second, and third poet was wholly, permanently fixed. He made us write the list to commit it to memory. Then, with however little English we knew, we could not even approach the third poet in the list, let alone the first, as we didn't have that strength. Hence, there was no fault in making us internalise the fixated judgement about English poets right from the outset because it is not apposite for us to critique the *rasa* of English poetry by employing our taste or tongue. Since we are not supposed to savour but gulp to eat, there is the fear of committing a mistake if factually, which is sweet, which is sour, is not written in the notebook. Let me tell you the resultant outcome of this. In our infancy, we noticed there was boundless *bhakti* regarding the poet Byron in the minds of our country's English learners. In the modern learners' mind, no such *bhakti* is ceremoniously present. Even a few days back, the way our youth used to feel thrilled upon hearing Tennyson's name did not feel the same anymore. It is known that the estimation of the mentioned poets by the critics in England has more or less changed. The natural reason for that change is rooted in the pace of the mind and social tempo of that place. But that reason is not present in us. Yet, the same result has been approximated. Actually, here, we lack a court of judgement; consequently, we have to manage carefully by importing the imitation of judgement from abroad. One might be stamped as an idiot if a view contrary to what is projected about a poet's prevalent value in the modern market; therefore, the market value of foreign literature has to be always remembered. Otherwise, our profession of school teaching can't be sustained; or we feel ashamed to broach the matter of Ibsen, Maeterlinck, and Russian novelists in our periodicals. If we do not move exactly in consonance with the progressive foreign critical intellectualism about not only literature but also economics, sociology, etc., if we chant John Stuart Mill's *mantras* in the age of Carlyle-Ruskin, or having perceived a change in the vogue of independent individualism abroad if we do not tune in with collectivism, then we will not be able to face the high school English teachers and the students of our country.

This question has risen in our minds: Even after practicing handwriting by tracing on a specimen script at an English-medium school for a long time, why have we not been able to express originality on any matter emphatically? The reason is – the place from where knowledge is being borrowed is the same place from where intellect is also lent. Therefore, I don't feel confident in employing my own discernment to practice the knowledge powerfully. In the field of knowledge and intellect an Englishman's son is not subservient to others; he is surrounded by an air of independent creation and independent judgement. A French scholar can fearlessly judge English knowledge because the power and the norms of criticism are inherent in French knowledge, which is his own. The rationale behind this is that from wherever the material is sought, the responsibility to examine is in one's own hands; hence, according to one's estimation, one assigns value, and one's own taste and opinion is good enough evidence to decide what to take and what to leave. Inferentially, in the business of wisdom and *bhava*, they are reliant only upon themselves. If this faith is not present, then originality cannot exist at all.

Our problem is that our entire knowledge from the beginning to the end is received from others. With what do I compare this knowledge, with what do I assess it? The weighing metal of one's own with which to estimate the weight is not there. Thus, the ticket with the weight and price tagged upon the imported material has to be accepted as complete, like *sixteen annas*. That is why those among the schoolmaster and the periodical writers who can precisely memorise and rote learn the ticket stamped with the material's identity and amount have a growing business. For ages, this is only how things have transpired, but will this be how things turn out forever?

Aashar, 1326

(Translated from: Tagore, Rabindranath. 'Vidyar Jachai.' *Shiksha*. Calcutta: Visva Bharati Granthalay, 1960. 221-223. Print.)

Notes on Indian Words:

rasa: The concept implies essence, taste, or flavour in Sanskrit and literally means juice. It is an indescribable concept in Indian aesthetics and refers to the suggestive essential flavour of any work of art that incites an emotional response in the audience. It is a reflective notion in which the interiority of *bhava* or human feelings is imbued in the surrounding embodied materiality. The *rasas* can be perceived by the *bhava* of a sensitive and sensible receiver. This idea has been extensively explained in Bharata Muni's *Natya Shastra*.

bhakti: The word denotes devotion in Sanskrit and refers to a religious movement in India. It is a tradition in Hinduism centred on the mutual dedication and love between a devotee and the god. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *bhakti marga* or the path of *bhakti* is higher than the two paths of knowledge and good work.

matras: A word or sound chanted to have a spiritual influence in Hinduism and Buddhism; an expression that is repeated to exude an innate belief.

bhava: It is the emotion or mood transmitted by an artist in any form of performing art. In Indian aesthetics and literature, it refers to the emotional state of the mind. In Sanskrit, the term means being or becoming, and also emotion, ecstasy, or expression.

Sixteen annas: This refers to a proverbial Bengali expression meaning completely or wholly. In India, the *anna* was a currency used during British rule when sixteen *annas* made one rupee.

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¹Tagore uses "Bangladesh" here and refers to the undivided Bengal as it existed before the Indian Partition. The word is dropped here and changed to "Bengal" instead to avoid confusion since Bangladesh is presently the name of a separate nation.