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A Poet's School: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Aesthetic Education

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Abstract

This paper looks into the dynamics and performatives of Tagore's school which was established in 1901 at Bolpur in West Bengal. He called it Santiniketan. The paper critiques Tagore's notions of pedagogy in relation to the pregnant network linking the students, teachers and their natural environment; further, it investigates how the school has manifested itself as a green discourse and worked itself out within the dialectic of space and place, giving Tagore's ideas and the pragmatics of execution a fresh circulation of understanding. Here, for the first time, Tagore's ideas on education and nature (eco-pedagogy) are elaborately problematised through the intersections of a variety of thoughts and concepts drawn from contemporary ecocritical studies, ecosophy, discourses on nature, culture, and ethics of humane holism and bioegalitarianism.

I

'By the bank of the river Padma, in Shilaidah, I lived a quiet life amidst my literary pursuits', wrote Rabindranath Tagore. 'With a mission to create I came to Santiniketan'.¹ It was a sublime mission that endeavoured to turn an ashram into a school woven around with fresh ideals of education and a distinct aesthetics grounded in notions of 'splendid waste', as opposed to the conventional social goals of gain, prosperity and cultural recognition. Tagore himself likened the experiment to the delightful 'irresponsibility' of the butterfly. He wrote:

¹ See Tagore, 'Siksha', in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.14 (Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1992), p.477.

The silkworm seems to have a cash value credited in its favour somewhere in Nature's accounting department . . . but the butterfly is irresponsible. The significance which it may possess has neither weight nor use and is lightly carried on its pair of dancing wings. Perhaps it pleases someone in the heart of the sunlight, the Lord of colours, who has nothing to do with account books and has a perfect mastery in the great art of wastefulness.²

In 1901 the 'poet's school', the ashram, was set up by courting values which did not discount the butterfly (the ideal, the conventionally impractical) as against the silkworm (*utilitas* and *potentia*). So when Tagore brought together five boys and five teachers 'one sunny day in winter, among the warm shadows of the tall straight *sal* trees with their branches of quiet dignity, he started to write a poem in a medium not of words'. Seeking to exorcise the phantom of his boyhood experiences in school where he was briefly enrolled, the poet sought to 'live in the lives of other boys, and to build its missing paradise with ingredients which may not have any orthodox material, prescribed measure, or standard value'.³ He wanted a school away from the turmoil of human habitation which would be the site for 'quiet studies and teaching' where pupils would 'grow up in the sacred and profound atmosphere of learning' while 'responding creatively and sympathetically' to the environment.⁴ Tagore was determined his school would be situated 'far from the crowded city' in a place having the 'natural advantages of open sky, fields, trees and the like. It should be a retreat'.⁵ How is education affected by locale? How can 'open sky, fields, trees' contribute to an 'atmosphere of learning'? What kind of work space did the ashram-school grow into, and what was its life-world?

II

Tagore declared:

In our highly complex modern conditions, mechanical forces are organized with such efficiency that the materials produced grow far in advance of man's capacity to select and assimilate them to suit his nature and needs. Such an overgrowth, like the rank vegetation

² Rabindranath Tagore, 'A Poet's School', in *Towards Universal Man* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p.285. This essay was written in 1926.

³ *Ibid.*, pp.285 & 286.

⁴ Uma Das Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.15.

⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Problem of Education', in *Towards Universal Man* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p.75.

of the tropics, creates confinement for man. The nest is simple. It has an easy relationship with the sky; the cage is complex and costly, it is too much itself, excommunicating whatever lies outside. And modern man is busy building his cage. He is always occupied in adapting himself to its dead angularities, limiting himself to its limitations, and so he becomes a part of it.⁶

The spectre of the 'encaging' predatory techno-infiltration left Tagore worried as he contemplated the nature of his school and the atmosphere he hoped it would generate. The poet's school was envisaged around a life far removed from that pentagon of physical power which machines were designed to build, yet it was one devoid of prejudice towards technology's non-aggressive benevolence. Tagore believed that the 'glorious march of cement-concrete' civilisation in India did not begin in the city, but grew out of the forest. And it had happened inadvertently, through humans conjoining with the natural world around them to create spaces that were at once crowded and open. This openness, this decongestion, kindled the consciousness of India and prevented her soul from being a congealed immobile entity.⁷ Tagore found an 'energy' in the forest (read as nature)—the cult of *tapovan* (forest tradition)⁸—an immense, immanent, immutable 'quiet power' that infused the spirit of the world—a power in solitude, emerging in meditation:

the sub-conscious remembrance of some primeval dwelling place, where in our ancestors' minds were figured and voiced the mysteries of the inarticulate rocks, the rushing water and the dark whispers of the forest, was constantly stirring my blood with its call. (Some living memory in me seemed to ache for the playground it had once shared with the primal life in the *illimitable magic of land, water and air*.) The thin shrill cry of the high-flying kite in the blazing sun of a dazed Indian midday sent to a solitary boy the signal of a dumb distant kinship. The few coconut palms growing by the boundary wall of our house, like some war captives from an older army of invaders of this earth, spoke to me of the eternal

⁶ Tagore, 'A Poet's School', p.289.

⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Tapovan', in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.14 (Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1992), p.384.

⁸ *Tapovan*, wrote Tagore, is 'the forest resort of the patriarchal community of ancient India. Those who are familiar with Sanskrit literature know that this was not a colony of people with a primitive culture. They were seekers of truth, for the sake of which they lived in purity but not puritanism; they led a simple life, but not one of self-mortification. They did not advocate celibacy and were in close touch with people who pursued worldly interests'. See 'A Poet's School', p.287. See also Tagore, 'Tapovan'.

companionship which the great brotherhood of trees have ever offered to man.⁹

This vital 'kinship' with nature would determine the temper of the ashram and its enviable communitarian space. Tagore likened himself to

the gardener who has to look after the tender young shoots of the human soul. When one mind meets another in perfect harmony, the outcome is spontaneous joy. This joy is instinct with creative energy. Education in an ashram is the gift of this bounteous joy.¹⁰

Thus education in the ashram was 'education for life at its fullest'. Tagore made children realise that

education is a permanent part of the adventure of life; it is not like a painful hospital treatment for curing them of the congenital malady of their ignorance, but is a function of health, the natural expression of their mind's vitality.¹¹

Endowed with a 'curiosity' to establish 'contact with their immediate environment', students quested for worlds beyond the textbooks and looked for 'joy' in direct experiences. The ashram-school should have an 'atmosphere', Tagore thought, responsive to 'colour, perfume, music and movement'.¹²

According to Tagore's theory of pedagogy, the teacher, the taught and nature were caught in gestaltist games of 'mutual domination' and 'interchangeable supremacy' involving imagination, empathy and tolerance. In this deconstructed site of 'suffering', teaching was not monological instruction but part of a collective process of aggrandisement where no member of the suffering team survived at the expense of another. All this might urge us to rethink the connection that Tagore wanted his pupils to make beyond the academy. What did Tagore mean when evoking the 'signal of a dumb distant kinship' connecting a solitary boy in a 'dazed Indian midday' with the 'thin shrill cry of the high-flying kite in the blazing sun'? Is experience in pedagogy strictly subservient to textual meaning or do experiences outside the domain of ceaseless meaning-effects contribute to experiential richness? Willie Pearson

⁹ Tagore, 'A Poet's School', pp.290–91. Italics are mine.

¹⁰ See Rabindranath Tagore, 'Ashramer Siksha', in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.14 (Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1992), p.431. Translation by Tagore.

¹¹ Tagore, 'A Poet's School', p.299.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.300.

recorded an incident that occurred during a class conducted under a tree (this practice continues to this day) when a boy drew his attention to the song of a bird.

I am quite sure that my class learnt more from that bird than it had ever done from my teaching and something that they would never forget in life. For myself, my ears were opened, and for several days I was conscious of the songs of the birds as I had never been before.¹³

What did the class learn from the bird's song? Arguing this within certain premises of meaning and epistemological debates is difficult. Gumbrecht argues that 'rather than having to think, always and endlessly, what else there could be, we sometimes seem to connect with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skin'.¹⁴ In trying to grow an intense 'connect' with nature and objects, Tagore looked into the possibilities of 'intense joy' generated through efforts to discover a layer of existence beyond the mere cultural and material values of things—experiencing the 'things of the world in their pre-conceptual thingness'.¹⁵ Tagore wanted his school to have an alternative atmosphere of 'aesthetic intensity' within a non-Cartesian and pre-discursive 'presence-pedagogy'.

The integration of the laws of nature and the laws of humans operate on 'possibilities'. For Tagore the possibilities were 'surprise', 'wonder', 'excitement', 'mysteries'. He delighted in the singularity of objects, refusing to see them merely as 'objects for use'. He sought thus to *create* 'possibilities'. This is a mode of thinking which considers a student's reading a book sitting on a branch of a tree no less significant than his doing so sitting on a chair or a bench. Tagore here is breaking limits, the 'dead angularities', deconstructing the impositions of use-value and object-value that modern, mechanistic society clamp on us. Children in the ashram needed a world capable of surprising them, a world which humans had not programmed, a world whose projection supervened on mutual knowing and seeing. Thus configured his ashram came to resemble a space close to the Heideggerean 'homeland' where 'the powers of nature around us and the remnants of historical tradition remain together'.¹⁶

¹³ Himanshu Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1962), p.296. Willie Pearson was an Englishman and a resident of Shantiniketan.

¹⁴ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p.106.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.118.

¹⁶ See Martin Heidegger, 'Homeland' (trans. Thomas F. O'Meara), in *Listening*, Vol.6 (1971), pp.231–8.

III

According to Tagore,

a boy should live in the midst of nature. Towns are not our natural abodes, and have been built to supply our material needs. That we should be born in towns and be brought up in the lap of stone and brick was never intended by Providence. . . people who live in them, and are absorbed by work, hardly feel that anything is missing from their lives, even though they have already strayed from nature and are daily getting further and further away from the great universe. But nature's help is indispensable when we are still growing up, and still learning, and before we are drawn neck and crop into the whirlpool of affairs. Trees and rivers, and blue skies and beautiful views are just as necessary as benches and blackboards, books and examinations.¹⁷

What was the nature of a biocentric way to pedagogy? Tagore looked into the 'ecological self', a self that can transcend both individualism and holism. This non-Cartesian process of learning amidst nature—human consciousness as an extension of the environment—is an energy flow where individuals are like 'local perturbations' having an awareness of individualism and a sense of being a part of the whole. Endorsing *friluftsliv* (open-air life), Tagorean ecosophy saw this learning amidst nature as partaking of a joyous energy flow (*lila*) whose foundation was in *tapasya* (mediation of restraint). John Seed argues that

'I am protecting the rain forest' develops into 'I am part of the rain forest protecting myself'. I am that part of the rain forest recently emerged into thinking. The thousands of years of separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature.¹⁸

This is not *unio mystica* but rather a separate investment in transpersonality with nature, an 'earth wisdom'.¹⁹ Tagore vindicated the growth of an 'ecological self' necessary to the 'pedagogic' and complementary to the 'cultural'. I would term this the 'ecological capital', the intervention and poaching of which can end up in multiple personalities—green low, green high, green deep. Without being 'partist', Tagore accented the 'relational' aspect between holism and individualism—'dividualism'. Within the co-operative of the ashram, Tagore intended to fasten a

¹⁷ Tagore, 'The Problem of Education', p.72.

¹⁸ J. Seed, 'Anthropocentrism', in B. Devall and G. Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1985), p.243.

¹⁹ For more on this see Doris LaChapelle, *Earth Wisdom* (San Diego: Guild of Tudors Press, 1978).

green sky over all but not in a reductive way which would have disabled individual experiences from speaking out in different tones. Closeness to nature has its own 'commonly understood' integrative ways informed with certain levels of understanding and experiences; but this closeness opens out on different registers when nature-proximity is individualised. Contiguity to nature would have produced many Tagores, but did it? What was desired as a general widely-approved integration with nature and nature-consciousness manifested itself through different socio-aesthetic appropriations by students—the wisdom was similar, the wiseness different.

The ashram created 'personal moods, values, aesthetic and philosophical convictions which serve no necessarily utilitarian, nor rational ends'. In a deep ecological way it formed itself around goodness, balance, truth and beauty of the natural world, and of a human being's biological and psychological need to be fully integrated into it.²⁰ Although largely concerned with the deep interdependence between nature and culture, Tagore saw a certain 'human need' to affirm ecological interdependence. The logic of his metaphysics meant that his students needed to have, or acquire, a certain order of maturity, an awareness of their embeddedness in the vast web of life.

Tagore was convinced that being let loose in nature with a purpose (a freedom that is both mindless and alert) had the potential to cultivate a shared 'conscience' linking people to land, commodity to community, clothes and nakedness, knowledge and mystery, affection and fealty. The 'sacred' that Tagore wanted his ashramites and the ashram-school to touch was transformative, vital and rejuvenating, requiring what Leopold terms 'intelligent tinkering';²¹ this 'sacred' denied anthropocentric mastery and exerted on the students a charm, a mystery. Yet the act of teaching could not be just intuitive or instinctive; it required the cultivation of a 'conscience' able to understand bioegalitarianism in all its complexity. The world view of the ashram-campus was grounded in the notion of inter-relatedness—ecopsychological, ecosophical and ecotechnological. It drew on what Morris Berman calls a 'participant consciousness', and what Warwick Fox dubs 'transpersonal identification with life'.²² This is not a world of material objects so much as a world of energy, quite different in character and consequence.

²⁰ See Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, p.66.

²¹ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p.190.

²² Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p.147. Also see Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1990).

Yet if Tagore's vexed 'deep' ecological position sounds thoroughly mystical, the governance of the ashram was firmly rooted in material practice (sets of rituals, prescriptions and injunctions). It was not a place of unmixed contemplation. The connection that Tagore wanted his students to imbibe was both non-material *and* material, psychological *and* corporeal, mediated *and* non-mediated—and yet not 'mystical'. His pedagogy was performative, reflective, transformative—and non-utopian. It was informed both by inheritance (the ideal of the *tapovan*) and the practical irreversibility of ashramic practices grounded in specific historical and material circumstances.

Was Tagore aware of the contradictions inherent in his scheme? Was he conscious of the fact that, as Horkheimer has argued, a 'return to nature' cannot avoid the conflict between man and nature.²³ *Tapovan*, a 'minority tradition', favoured the use of 'material technology that was elegant, sophisticated, appropriate, and controlled within the context of a traditional society'.²⁴ Thus nature was appropriated by men in *tapovan*, too, something that Tagore chose to overlook. Were *tapovan* principles all that relevant to an ashram founded in the early twentieth century? The fact that Tagore thought they were testifies to the vigour of the belief in a 'minority tradition', which Devall and Sessions claim focuses on 'personal growth within a small community and selects a path to cultivating ecological consciousness while protecting the ecological integrity of the place'.²⁵ But didn't the ashram run the risk of being critiqued as a univocal 'minority tradition'?

However submitting to nature does not necessarily involve returning to a pre-technological age where work is sundered from science. For Tagore, nature did not protest the muteness of science, but rather its abuses. There was no intractable divide therefore between the science-blessed human and the science-hurt non-human. The embodied self takes nourishment from the duality of the two forces. By spurning the 'use-value' approach to nature, did Tagore hope to redefine 'self-preservation' beyond the domains of instrumental reason?

Tagore's appropriation of nature in thoughts about green pedagogy had a kind of internal limit to it. In his vision for the ashram, Tagore hoped to minimise the opposition between nature and man which, in the reverse, leads us to conclude that the nature–man conflict has always had a remarkably troubling

²³ See M. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p.127.

²⁴ See Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, p.97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.3.

career. By his choice of a pastoral 'locale' to establish the school, Tagore made nature available to his students in a 'liberating' way, reducing considerably the dichotomy between *res cogitans* (thinking things, the mind) and *res extensa* (extended things, bodies). But if education benefits from closeness to nature, and as Jurgen Habermas has pointed out, a kind of 'knowledge-accumulation' swells, does it still require an 'anthropocentric' framework? Habermas notes that it was assumed that the 'proper norms of regulating the relation between society and nature would somehow follow from the communicatively conceived idea of the human good life without reference to nature as an end-in-itself'.²⁶ Tagore envisaged a 'human good' within the discursive ethics of the ashram which, again, suggests the anthropomorphic ends ('soft anthropocentrism') although on strictly non-Baconian registers.²⁷ Yet I would argue that the discursive space opened up by Tagore's plan allowed also for 'knowledge accumulation' by means of human and non-human negotiation and opposition. The ashram was a 'human settlement', planted in the midst of a forest. It could not, obviously, leave nature untouched. As a site of power, the ashram-school hosted interactions with nature that approached a 'discipline' and 'punish' regime of values and practices.

But I demur in identifying Tagore's concerns here wholly with what Habermas would ascribe as 'nature-in-itself'. Applying the principle of liberation to nature means 'allowing' nature the space to articulate back its values—intrinsic or extrinsic. The ashram encouraged this through its Spartan infrastructure and its austere life-habits, and its emphasis on connecting with the 'earth'. (For instance, the ashram students spent their days walking bare-footed on muddy roads, sitting on bare earth, and walking with their teachers through groves of trees). Tagore's resurgent motives here were, however, a little different from the Naessain school of 'deep ecology'.²⁸ As a site of 'culture amidst nature', the ashram was not a post-Enlightenment project expressing 'disenchantment of the world'. The ashram had rules, protocols, and followed the footsteps of

²⁶ See J. Habermas, 'A Reply to My Critics', in J. Thompson and D. Held (eds), *Habermas: Critical Debates* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.247.

²⁷ This is in deep opposition to the robustly instrumentalist and strongly anthropocentric understanding of nature that Bacon endorsed.

²⁸ Arne Naess (1912–2009) is a Norwegian philosopher who coined the phrase 'deep ecology'. Greg Garrad writes: 'The "poet laureate" of deep ecology is Gary Snyder and its philosophical guru is Arne Naess: Naess sets out eight key points of the deep ecology platform in George Sessions's definitive anthology *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* (1995). The crucial ones are as follows: 1. The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent worth). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes; and 4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantially smaller human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life *requires* a smaller human population'. See Greg Garrad, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.20–21.

science. Still, it was not free from fancy and myths. It was less intellectual and more experiential. But the ambiguity of Tagore's romanticisation of the *tapovan* remains.

Tagorean ecosophy viewed the *sanmilan* (communion) of nature and human forces from the perspective of a philosophical–religious world view. Within this framework it was out of order to see any dissolution of reason into nature; rather, it reasoned nature out by way of a meaningful consonant dialogue. Note: this is not 'de-development' (in the words of Ted Trainer),²⁹ but prioritisation of the non-instrumental reason which, without being extremist in its interpretation of nature as either a space for wholesome consumption or brute untainted vitality, treats nature as a 'text' of meaningful 'suffering'. That 'suffering'—labour, pain and consequence—was inscribed within nature but it had been occluded by modern society's Promethean instrumentalist and consumptive modes of behaviour, something that Tagore wanted his students to acknowledge. Education afforded space to revitalise the 'principles of co-operation in our daily life', providing children with opportunities to 'give play' to their 'creative joys by inventing things with the help of whatever material lies ready at hand'.³⁰ The positive suffering generated by the physical inconveniences of life in the ashram ensured that the students' needs were simplified. This helped development in them of a sense of responsibility that transcended grumbling over deficiencies. Because they sometimes went hungry, Tagore pointed out, they came to realise the importance of applying 'extra zest on their vegetable patches'.³¹

This must seem a hard philosophy but it reflected Tagore's deep belief that enjoyment was to be found through sacrifice. To his mind, easy accessibility and ready availability were implacable enemies of creativity. Suffering and 'lack' were the ways to true learning. He considered that, as far as possible, schools should honour 'the ideal of reducing the unnecessary in our life'; he was convinced that humankind was diminished once it made the 'unnecessary' indispensable.

An institution of this kind should not only train up one's limbs and mind to be ready for all emergencies, but to be attuned to the response between life and the world, to find the balance of their harmony which is wisdom. The first important lesson for children

²⁹ See F. Trainer, *Abandon Affluence* (London: Zed Books, 1985), pp.176–8.

³⁰ Tagore, 'Ashramer Siksha', p.431.

³¹ Tagore, 'A Poet's School', pp.298–9.

*in such a place would be that of improvisation, the ready-made having been banished in order to give constant occasion to explore one's capacity through surprise achievements. I must make it plain that this implies a lesson not in simple life, but in creative life.*³²

Education amidst nature involved, in Tagore's view, 'sacrifice and resignation'. The goal was to find a point of 'peace' in the constant traffic of contending forces. This end-point was *santarasa* (*rasa* of peace, tranquillity). *Tapovan* had *santarasa*.³³ Tagore's ashram inhabited a place called *Santiniketan* (abode of peace). This peace was not, however, the 'tranquillity' of nature. Around it hovered an inherent disquiet. Tagore's interdependence with nature was not a given but a fragile synergy requiring continual attendance and alert commitment. Tagore thus proposed a new ethic of 'being' and 'doing' that, by not losing sight of conflating persuasions, redefined 'biocentrism' through the promotion of self-realisation in students encouraged to connect to the 'pleasure of real freedom'. He opined that 'boys are happy to live in the discipline of nature. The discipline helps them to develop fully and taste the pleasure of real freedom, and it makes their bodies glow with the vigour of their sprouting minds'.³⁴

So, without being an 'ecotopia', the ashram fitted Tagore's 'aesthetic space'. It had both technological and post-technological rationality, becoming in the process an 'art of life'. By overlooking the 'differential' in biotic existence, nature-sacralisation might risk slithering into 'future primitive'.³⁵ However this was not what the ashram space was created for. It was, rather, intended as a space of 'resistance', as a site for a struggle against instrumentalist and exploitative societies and for a new and better understanding of the dynamics of 'human labour'.³⁶ Fritz Schumacher argues in *Small is Beautiful* that 'we are estranged from reality and inclined to treat as valueless everything that we have not made ourselves'. The use-value capital bequeathed through our post-Enlightenment inheritance unwisely blinds us to the 'capital provided by nature and not by man—and we do not even recognise it as such'.³⁷ Tagore looked into the generation of 'capital'—eco-aesthetic capital—which in its failure to deny, as argued earlier, the oppositional and tensional dialogics with nature, cannot, however, dis-acknowledge the non-instrumentalist appropriation of a

³² *Ibid.*, p.295. Italics are mine.

³³ Tagore, 'Tapovan', p.354.

³⁴ Tagore, 'The Problem of Education', p.71.

³⁵ See Chim Blea, 'Animal Rights and Deep Ecology Movements', in *Synthesis*, Vol.23 (1986), pp.13–14.

³⁶ See Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), pp.59–60.

³⁷ E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (London: Abacus, 1974), p.11.

non-human space. The ashram was a space for ‘meditation’ unmediated by what Horkheimer has preferred to term ‘pragmatic intelligence’.³⁸

IV

Tagore observed:

We can grow into full manhood only if we have been *nursed* by earth and water, sky and air, and nourished by them as by our mother’s *breasts*. So let the children *play* under the open sky which is the playground of sunlight and clouds. Let them not be taken away from *Bhuma*, the Supreme Spirit. Let them *see* the sun unlock the day with bright *fingers*, and the tranquil glow of evening merge into the star-studded darkness of night. . . . Let them *hear* the roar of thunder and *see* the massed clouds darken the woods before bursting into rain. When the rains are over, let the children *see* the green and dewy fields waving in the wind and overflowing with corn as far as the horizon.³⁹

The primal energy of life residing at the heart of nature, argued Tagore, becomes the motive force that actuates a child and allows for his rhythmic connection with the universe. Tagore saw the ‘necessity’ for the human body to interact with the earth in its ‘nakedness’, in an unabashed state of communion. Moreover he suggested that the nakedness of the child’s body interacting with the nakedness of nature gave a different connotation to the notion of ‘shame’.

Education at the ashram was accordingly envisaged by Tagore as a kind of ‘shamelessness’, not of the conventional sort, but in the sense of ‘unclothed’, ‘unwrapped’. Book-bound, education that believed in imparting knowledge of the world but not of the earth, of culture but not of nature, of intellect but not of the soul, requires reinvestments in greater levels of ‘connection’ with the circumambient ‘invisible’ in nature. Tagore lamented: ‘We do not touch the world with our mind, we touch it by books’.⁴⁰ Not that Tagore disapproved of books. Quite the opposite. But ultimately he wanted education to connect with the ‘flesh of our body’ and with the ‘flesh of the earth’, and so feed the intellect.

³⁸ M. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p.103.

³⁹ Tagore, ‘The Problem of Education’, pp.73–4. Apart from the word ‘*Bhuma*’ all italics are mine.

⁴⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Abaran’, in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol.14 (Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1992), p.383.

He noted that 'children with the freshness of their senses come directly to the intimacy of this world. ... They must accept it *naked* and simple and never lose their power of quick communication. For our perfection we have to be at once *savage* and *civilized*'.⁴¹ Which is better, education achieved through books or that assimilated by way of 'talking' (through 'movements of the eyes, modulation of the voice, signs of hands and fingers'⁴²)? Tagore had no doubt. 'Speaking' lessons, he thought, was generally preferable to 'reading' lessons because it obviated 'world-weariness'.⁴³ But it was not just 'speaking' in the literal sense, but more a 'reaching out' of the whole body towards nature. This was a form of education untrammelled by tropes of shame and culture. It was one open and receptive to the 'savage' that dwells within the untutored child. The object was 'a continual reclamation of the non-civilized'.⁴⁴ Tagore's 'peripatetic method' of learning yoked the activity of the mind to the locomotion of the body.

Bunyard and Morgan-Grenville argue that 'in modern farming the farm worker is increasingly isolated from the soil he is tilling; he sits encased in his tractor cab, either with ear muffs to shut out the noise or with radio blaring, and what goes on behind the tractor has more to do with the wonders of technology than with the wisdom of countless generations of his predecessors'.⁴⁵ Tagore had no time for conventional classrooms which sought to impart life experiences to students seated in screened-off cubicles, totally disconnected from the natural environment. Accordingly he proposed that

when they are not engaged in study, the students should work in the garden, loosening the soil around the roots of trees, watering plants and training hedges. Their contact with nature would thus be both manual and mental. In favourable weather the classes should be held in the shade of big trees. Part of the teaching should be in the form of discussion between teacher and student while they are walking between the rows of trees. In the evening recess the students should read the stars, cultivate music, and listen to legendary and historical tales.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Tagore, 'A Poet's School', pp.291–2. Italics are mine.

⁴² Tagore, 'Abaran', p.343.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.344.

⁴⁴ Tagore, 'A Poet's School', p.292.

⁴⁵ P. Bunyard and F. Morgan-Grenville (eds), *The Green Alternative* (London: Methuen, 1987), p.71.

⁴⁶ Tagore, 'The Problem of Education', p.75.

In this way the ashram became a transformative space through the visibility of its inmates, their works and ways, and an invisibility made visible through the changes that it wrought on the inmates and the character of its operation. The body in education is a 'responsive' subject alive to powers of transcendence. The initial mode of 'perception' in the ashram was operated through the body-subject, an embodied consciousness. Abstraction from the corporeal world was denied and perception was structured in 'depth' (the phenomenon was not prescriptive but ambiguous). Tagore's young students were challenged to engage with the uninhibited and the uncultivated, forms of 'unpremeditated' experience tailored to appeal, primarily, to the body—the secret life of the wind, the shadows of the scudding clouds, the rhythm of the cricket-songs, the power of fragrance, the movement of the buds into bloom—for as Tagore observed,

children love the earth with its dust and its dirt, and they love the sun, the wind and the rain. They do not like to be dressed up, they enjoy themselves most when they are discovering the world with their senses, and they are not a bit ashamed to be their natural selves.⁴⁷

So the perceptual logic of the ashram was different; its 'interiority' different too. Through 'the flesh of the ashram', students encountered inter-subjectivities which whispered of secrecies and codes of 'nakedness', the language of glances, gestures and traces.

V

'It is *evil* to destroy and to check life', Albert Schweitzer, the great humanist, declared.⁴⁸ What moral code did the ashram seek to teach? Was Tagore trying to instruct and inculcate an intelligible conception of what *good* nature could be? No, it was not the non-sentient aspect of the non-human world that mattered to him; rather the ashram preached a consciousness that valued the 'teleological centers of life', to use the words of Paul Taylor,⁴⁹ a coherence that drew upon a deep sense of the interconnectedness of things, a belief that every atom of the natural world deserves reverence for what it is, not necessarily for its utility for humans. It would not be too much of a stretch to see Tagore's

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.80–1.

⁴⁸ Albert Schweitzer, 'The Ethic of Reverence for Life' [1923], in Tom Regan and Peter Singer (eds), *Animal Rights and Human Obligations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976), pp.133–8.

⁴⁹ Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p.122.

insistence on building an 'atmosphere' for his ashram-school as similar to Aldo Leopold's holistic 'land ethic', which urges on humans a moral extensionism—challenges them to embrace soil and water, plants and animals as equals, and demands that they too become citizens of the holistic community. Tagore, too, grappled with the complicated ethics of 'moralising the biological given'. He accepted that he was part of a 'historically objective world'; nevertheless he dedicated himself to realising, in the ashram, a type of eco-essentialism geared to furthering the well-being both of its students and the natural life that flourished around them. The ashram was about 'humane holism'.

Tagore's ashram, then, embodied a 'being' located in its inhabitants. From a Heideggerean perspective, we could say that the core of it was how the ashramites manifested themselves to each other in a non-utilitarian way. Tagore referred to it seriously as a commingling of 'souls', a clearing of spaces with other species-beings, an effusion of 'joy' (*ananda*).⁵⁰ He noted that 'perfect freedom lies in the harmony of relationship which we realize not through *knowing*, but in *being* . . . We attain the world of freedom', he concluded, 'only through perfect sympathy'.⁵¹ In other words, Tagore tried to make his ashram a place where the intrinsic value of non-human entities was recognised and allowed to 'exist' unmediated. The authenticity of the place lay in its respect for the 'sacrament of co-existence'. It was an ontological democracy wherein nature was looked upon as an entity-in-itself (and not as an object-for-something-else) and its human inhabitants as beings-with-the-world. In the Japanese tradition of looking into 'nature', communication is sought to be effected through the 'poetic' (music, poetry and imagination). Sensibility and 'sympathy' power the participatory dialogue.⁵² As Augustin Berque writes:

The logic of the Japanese medial process, or *médiance*, tends both to blur the identity of the self and, at the same time, to enhance the identification of the self with what is not the self: environment both social and natural. These processes involve not only psychological, social and ecological relations as such (eg., self and others, self and environment) but, more, generally, the relation of the subject with the object.⁵³

⁵⁰ Tagore, 'Tapovan', p.357.

⁵¹ Tagore, 'A Poet's School', p.291.

⁵² See Augustin Berque, 'Some Traits of Japanese *Fūdosei*', in *The Japan Foundation Newsletter* 14, No.5 (1987), pp.1–7.

⁵³ Augustin Berque, 'Identification of the Self in Relation to the Environment', in Nancy Ross Rosenberger (ed.), *Japanese Sense of Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.94.

Something similar informed the functioning of the ashram-space.⁵⁴ The ‘trajection’ of the ashram—to use Berque’s term—was a *médiance* where society was encouraged to relate to nature in ways and on levels different from the self’s relation with the environment.

Tagore wrote that man realises his greatness in two ways, one in his individuality, in his separateness from others, and the other through union with others: one through gratification and the other through connection or collection communion.⁵⁵ He suggested that the ethics of self-cultivation and the aestheticisation of individuality were not divorced from broader communion with nature. In such an ethos of realisation lay man’s pilgrimage. This *tirtha* as Tagore called it, using the Hindu religious term, was less about visiting a site than more about the transformation (processuality) imparted by the experience. *Tirtha*, Hindus conventionally think, comes from certain objects—water or portions of earth—which contain ‘soul substance’. But ablution does not bring peace and redemption when the water the devout dips in is merely considered in its objecthood (water considered only for drinking, bathing and washing). That requires a separate level of connection and interdependence which comes from the ‘soul substance’—a triadic integration of earth, humankind and the divine. Tagore, too, saw nature and man as interconnected and interpenetrating. (One is reminded of Tu Wei-ming’s concept of a ‘continuity of being’.⁵⁶) Students in the ashram-school were taught to have faith in ‘relations of sensibility and realisations’, to trust in the outbound sensate experiences provided by the ‘logic of the senses’.⁵⁷ Tagore was not particularly interested in his pupils learning technological skills or accumulating knowledge that would allow them to pass exams. He wanted them to forge an ‘identity’, and for that he needed them to undertake a *tirtha*, a journey. It would be a journey filled with possibilities and some seeming ‘impossibilities’ (which however were not to be interpreted as unachievable). As for the process—the technique—here Tagore wrote cryptically that the circulation of air in its quietness is more powerful than the storm, since storms do not last whereas the quiet movement of air embraces the whole earth. Evidently, the ashram was intended as Tagore’s *sadhana*, a Way, the site of what Chu Hsi has termed ‘humaneness’, a praxial ground of interpenetrative processes, almost always in the making, on the move, quietly in attendance.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Tagore, ‘Tapovan’, p.358.

⁵⁶ For greater elaboration see Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

⁵⁷ Tagore, ‘Tapovan’, p.360.

VI

A dream, an ideal, does not simply happen; it needs to be pursued. Tagore proposed a 'freedom', but the goal was not devoid of method. Harkening back to the ancient 'forest tradition' (the *tapovan*) was all well and good but tapping into its efficacy required modulated and critical appropriation (like the act of meditation which Tagore so obsessively emphasised as part of his ashram-school curriculum) which recognised the imperative of changing times. The ashram-school could not have functioned hermetically sealed within narrow forest-school laws, indifferent to contemporary developments in governance and values. As a space it needed both professionalisation and domestication. Tagore began with an ancient tradition and methodised it (something I would like to term as wise-use principle) to make it relevant to his times.

The discipline of *brahmacharya* (a mode of life embedded in self-restraint and self-discipline) is, for me, green bureaucracy. The issue is less about allowing freedom to reign *per se* and more to do with a distinct kind of freedom formulated around the notional boundaries that *brahmacharya* proffered. Tagore recommended nature's method of discipline. He dubbed it 'freedom cure'. Superficially, it resembled the doctrine of discipline by natural consequence formulated by Jean-Jaques Rousseau and developed by Herbert Spencer.⁵⁸ But Tagore's approach was more humane in spirit and touched with greater sympathy for the erring child than is evident in the approach of those two thinkers. Tagore observed that when mind and life are given 'full freedom' they achieve health. Naming it as a system of freedom cure, he wanted his boys to run about, swim, climb difficult trees and get drenched by the rain, and sometimes come to grief.

So within the *habitus* of the ashram-school, Tagore unleashed a kind of green democracy, a discourse of green politics. This philosophy is not inviting of the 'teacher', but requires a 'guru' cognisant of the 'Law' built into the dynamics of nature and culture. The teacher might have formal competence, but the guru will give much more than he is paid for; in the Indian tradition a guru is one who 'devote[s] his whole mind and spirit to the service of his students', and expects from them in return a 'devotion that owes nothing to the fear of being punished, and is deep enough to be called religious and genuine enough to be called natural'.⁵⁹ Tagore's determination to impose a specific structure on the functioning of the ashram-school betrayed a discursive rigidity at odds with the

⁵⁸ An elaboration of this idea can be found in my forthcoming book on Tagore and Education where I have written at length on Hegel, Rousseau, Froebel, Pestalozzi and others.

⁵⁹ Tagore, 'The Problem of Education', p.79.

founder's commitment to the goals of freedom and creativity. Ashram education worked within a bureaucratic green frame shot through with an ecological ethic of survival. At its heart there was 'order', a code of institutional responsibility. Certainly Tagore's green discourse had a 'we-ness' to it; but this was not without the poet's 'I'. Fundamentally the ashram was a romantic dream that Tagore tried to realise through experiments whose efficaciousness he himself was not completely sure about. Even though the green pedagogical discourse provided sites of argument, agency and subjectivity, the broader discursive framework was not amenable to change. This was the superstructure of Tagore's green politics. By locating his educational ideas in the tradition of *tapovan*, Tagore was suggesting that man's position in the web of things is demonstrative of democratic co-operation between nature and culture, a relationship not of domination but of mutuality and conflation.

VII

When questions about the efficacy of the ashram-school were raised, Tagore was forced to explain his position and try to convince the world of the pragmatic efficacy of a poet's school. For someone who had not himself been to a 'proper' formal school,⁶⁰ this was no easy task. Defending green moralism and eco-pedagogy was an even greater challenge. But Tagore was a very persuasive advocate. Choosing the place (at Bolpur, a small town now in the district of Birbhum in West Bengal) and constructing it (Santiniketan) was a combination of a mind and matter—material and mental.

Experience of place, 'the feeling of place, and its origins' as Anne Stenros argues, is essential as 'place is the most unique experience of space, and it is man's deepest experience of the environment'.⁶¹ Tagore's choice of place, and his description of its landscape and environment, bears out the truth of this assessment.

All round our *ashram* is a vast open country, bare up to the line of the horizon except for sparsely-growing stunted date-palms and prickly shrubs struggling with anthills. Below the level of the field there extend numberless mounds and tiny hillocks of red gravel and pebbles of all shapes and colours, intersected by narrow

⁶⁰ For more information on Tagore's schooling see Rabindranath Tagore, *My Boyhood Days* (Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 2002); and Rabindranath Tagore, *My Reminiscences* (Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 2002).

⁶¹ Anne Stenros, 'Orientation, Identification, Representation: Space Perception in Architecture', in S. Aura, I. Alavalkama and H. Palmquist (eds), *Endoscopy as a Tool in Architecture* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 1993), p.76.

channels of rain-water. Not far away towards the south near the village can be seen through the intervals of a row of palm trees the gleaming surface of steel-blue water, collected in a hollow of the ground. A road used by the village people for their marketing in the town goes meandering through the lonely fields, with its red dust staring in the sun. Travellers coming up this road can see from a distance on the summit of the undulating ground the spire of a temple and the top of a building, indicating the Shanti-Niketan *ashram*, among its *amalaki* groves and its avenue of stately *sal* trees.⁶²

Many since have shared Tagore's conviction that Santiniketan is a very special place, a 'hearth' in communion with the cosmos.⁶³

In a way Tagore evinced an awareness of the 'where' in an Aristotlean manner. (Aristotle announced in his *Physics* that 'the power of place will be remarkable'.⁶⁴) However in the event he constructed something 'beyond the place', a 'potential space' where fertile minds were free to invest their own ideas into its growth. As a 'potential space', the ashram-school served to link, and bond, students and setting. (*Shanti-Niketan* is a composite of *niketan*, 'place', 'matter', and *shanti* 'peace'.) Yet it remained, throughout the decade and a half of its life as a school, a chorus-like space subject to continual experimentation. The poet's romantic temperament, his desire to break free from the pedagogic enchainment of his boyhood years, his incorporation of the inheritance of *tapovan*, his choice of proximity to nature, his anxieties over the relevance of a system nourished by *brahmacharya*—design, desire and dream—rendered the ashram as an 'unveiling', a phenomenon born out of the power to own a place by making it unravel a correspondence with certain unconcealments of mind. This is the fecund 'supplement' that the mind, in its construction of spaces, provides to the place *per se*. The ashram became, for Tagore, Gaston Bachelard's 'eulogized space', the 'lived in' space not inhabited neutrally but with 'all the partiality of the imagination'.⁶⁵ Tagore strongly defended both the space and the aesthetics of the place.

⁶² See Rabindranath Tagore, 'My School', in *Personality* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1970), p.131.

⁶³ The term is taken from the title of a book by Yi-Fu Tuan, *Cosmos and Hearth: A Cosmopolite's Viewpoint* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996).

⁶⁴ Quoted in Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p.ix.

⁶⁵ See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (trans. Maria Jolas) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p.xxxii.

Tagore's ashram-school was a union between mind and body—the mind that constructs and the body that experiences. It was 'closed' with respect to the limits of its physicality—something that topophilic Tagore could not bring himself to compromise with—yet 'open' because of the projections and prolepsis that his mind could not avoid bringing into it. Within its physical domain and liminality, the ashram became a site of negotiations among people of various caste and religious affiliations. As Tagore clearly pointed out: 'We have fully admitted the inequalities and varieties of human life in our ashram. We never try to gain some kind of outward uniformity by weeding out the differences of nature and training of our members'.⁶⁶ Hence it became a site of 'sympathy' and 'otherness', of a 'spectacle' and 'receptacle'. Finally, was the ashram-school a 'sacred' place? For Tagore it was. But for him its sacredness lay not simply in the physical location of the place, but also in the attachments which Tagore and his ashramites brought to it. We should think of this not just as an act of 'grasping space' in Matoré's sense, but as something that occurred through the quotidian, day-to-day business of the space: 'we project our personality into it, we are tied to it by emotional bonds; space is not just perceived. . . it is lived'.⁶⁷ Tagore strapped an idea to a place, introjected an idea to the making of a place, its aesthetic ramifications through culture, nature, order and equilibrium, interiorised it, and made the matter the possession of the mind.

However, the pregnant sacrality of the ashram built over a period of seventeen years teased out more spaces than it could accommodate, leading to its reconfiguration as Visva Bharati university in 1921. Salvaging a university from an ashram required 'producing' spaces with a deep investment in values and ethics of contestation. This transition had a 'reason' whose problematic required an understanding beyond an ectopian community; it needed a re-adjusting of the norms of biospherical egalitarianism to take account of the micrologics of a separate 'traffic' centred on the intriguing problems of 'border', 'conflict' and 'exchange'. The responsibility, the risk, and the ethics of the butterfly all had to adapt.

⁶⁶ Tagore, 'My School', in *Personality* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1945), p.136.

⁶⁷ See G. Matoré, *L'Espace humain* (Paris: La Columbe, 1962), pp.22–3 quoted in E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), p.10.