

Tagore's Concept of Community Development, Village Reconstruction and Community College Movement

In this paper I shall discuss Rabindranath Tagore's concept of community development or village reconstruction work and draw out the basic difference between Tagore's concept of community development and the community development programme of the Government of India introduced in the first five year plan. I shall also speak about Tagore's concept of community development in the context of the community college movement which has been growing in India ever since it began in 1995 with the opening of the Pondichery University Community College.

Tagore's ideas of community development or rural reconstruction were largely influenced by the ideas and forces with which he came into contact in early childhood. The influence on Tagore's thought of the Hindu Mela, which was founded in 1867 by Tagore's family, can hardly be exaggerated. The ideas which inspired the organisers of the mela were

- i) revival of crafts
- ii) cultivation of literature and music
- iii) physical exercise and
- iv) Self-help etc.

These ideas gave Tagore a clue to the social philosophy which he developed in later life.

Already in the early 80's of the 19th Cen., in some of Tagore's writings and utterances, we got a glimpse of the thesis which he was to propound in mature years. In one of his essays on Nationalism in 1883 he said,

“We may get many things from the British by begging but never self-reliance. What is obtained by begging

can never last. What is achieved by our own efforts has permanence.”

In another paper in 1884 (*hate kalome*: In actual practice) he remarked:

“It is the small work which is the most difficult of all; an imposing programme is often but an evasion of real work. Our sphere of activities lies near us and around us in our homes and in our neighbourhood.”

Here is a clear indication of the ideal on which his work of rural reconstruction was to be based. In the early 90’s the task of managing the ancestral property devolved on him, gave him an opportunity to come into close contact with the people of rural Bengal and enabled him to form a true picture of villages and their people. The more he saw of the poverty and suffering of the village people, the more restless he became to do something for them. He even said:

“It seemed to me a shameful thing that I should spend my days as a Zamindar, concerned only with money making and engrossed in my own profit and loss account.”

This first-hand experience of village life left a deep mark on his mind. Since then he harboured a strong feeling to do something for them. This inner craving to do something for them never weakened and continued to prey upon his mind up to the last days of his life.

His manifesto about the community development or the up-liftment of the village community was revealed in 1904 in an essay ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ (Indigenous or Indian Society), which was the first comprehensive statement of his social philosophy. The salient features of his manifesto are:

- i) The source of Europe's strength lies in the state; our well-being depends on the society. Our mind is no longer in the society. The system of social duties, which was carefully built up through the ages, is now breaking down;
- ii) Villagers are deprived of the services of the well-to-do classes and who are now drained of their wealth which is consumed in urban centres;
- iii) Scarcity of drinking water. Tanks, which were looked after by the rich, now left for the centre, are now contaminated;
- iv) The widening gulf between towns and villages produced some curious anomalies;
- v) Wealth was regarded as a social trust. It was the task of the wealthy to look after social work. They were the pillars of rural society. Old values have now changed. The pursuit of wealth calls or tempts the upper classes away from the village;
- vi) Country fairs which were invaluable means of public education have become fairs of ugly amusements;
- vii) It has all along been the tradition in India to cultivate human relationship on an extensive scale;
- viii) An essay written in 1905 'Luxury's Noose' (*samaj*) Tagore deplored the general tendency to luxury. There was a time when our country cared little for wealth. Indeed in a characteristic way she lent a peculiar dignity and beauty to poverty. To eat alone was a greater shame for us than to use humble banana leaves for sharing our food with others. (*samuha*, appendix to the essay *swadeshi samaj*).

He analysed the causes of the disintegration of village life and made concrete suggestions for its reconstruction. As a sequel to the essay on ‘*swadeshi samaj*’ prepared a complete scheme to give practical effect to the ideas he has expressed in it. The whole scheme centred on the reorganization of village life through concerted efforts. The salient features are:

- i) The revival of cottage industries to mitigate the poverty of the masses;
- ii) Intimate cooperation between rural workers and villagers as among the villagers themselves;
- iii) Curtailment of expenditure at socio-religious ceremonies;
- iv) The creation of a corps of volunteers to strive to establish harmonious relationship between Hindus and Mohammedans;
- v) Appointment of a people’s representative as the leader of the society.

In ‘*abastha-o-byabastha*’ written in 1905 Tagore went on to enlarge upon his idea of constructive work which he had already put forward in ‘*swadeshi samaj*’:

‘Let us not ask for any favour. Let us instead concentrate our attention on ourselves and we shall soon discover that what God has given us is enough for us constitutes the only tangible asset that we possess.’

Tagore laid great weight on the need for collective enterprise in villages. The use of labour-saving machinery was indispensable, but it would be possible only if collective cultivation were introduced through the initiative of union executives. In *Gora*, his novel published in 1910 have some unforgettable pages on rural life.

In April 1914 he acquired the site in village Surul, about a mile and a half from Shantiniketan (abode of peace) on which now stands the Institute of Rural Reconstruction Sriniketan (abode of well-being). Rabindranath invited Leonard Elmhirst from England to lead the Sriniketan Institute of Rural Reconstruction. He had met Leonard Elmhirst during his travels in America in 1920-21 when Elmhirst was graduating in agricultural studies at Cornell University. Early in 1915 he was associated with Bengal Social Service League and delivered three lectures bearing on the question of rural uplift. He chalked out a programme for the society which included the following items:

- *Education to illiterate;
- *Promotion of public health;
- *Arrangements in villages for good drinking water;
- *Establishing of cooperative credit societies;
- *Organization of public help in times of feminine etc.

* Restoring balance between city and village – it is the blind pull of urban forces, which in its turn is an inevitable concomitant of a profit civilization, and is responsible in the breakdown of village societies. The balance can be restored by corresponding readjustment in our values and our outlook.

What he wrote in *swdeshi samaj* in 1904 he endorsed it in 1939 in a speech in Sriniketan which was possibly the best and most authentic accounts on his first experience in villages. He emphasised on three points:

- i) Life must be developed in all its varied aspects;
- ii) The people must be induced to exert themselves;
- iii) Rural life must again be made cheerful

An all-round regeneration of village life with the active co-operation of the people so that life in the village may again radiate

with joy — this then was Tagore’s ideal in rural reconstruction. No regeneration could be real unless it was all round. Administrative machinery is devoid of true feeling because it lacked the throb of life. It is inadequate. Tagore has invoked several times the spirit of service and sacrifice. In a unique way he combines his humanitarianism with his individualism and also his sense of realism. Self-exertion is the condition of growth. He once said,

“The real service is to awaken the mind and to call forth its latent energies.” (1940 address at Sriniketan)

Tagore thought rural problems must be tackled in a scientific spirit. It needs expert handling – he first wanted investigation of the economic problems of Sriniketan villages. Whatever you want to give them give with respect and infuse self-confidence in the villagers. All through his life he was an ardent advocate of rural uplift work. It was far more important in his eyes than the “pure politics.” There was a remarkable consistency in his ideas on rural reconstruction over a period of some 50 years. In *swadeshi samaj* he appeared in the main as an advocate of the rehabilitation of the village society. He said that the greatest task before the rural workers is to teach the villagers to stand on their own legs, and collectively look after general welfare (A letter to a worker in Kaligram). His village reconstruction work had two principles:

- i) Without trying to impose ideas from outside, the workers should slowly build up their programme on the basis of the experience gained in the field. There is nothing like drawing on one’s own resources.
- ii) Tagore decided that approach to the rural problems should be integrated and not piecemeal.

These two general principles formed the base on which Elmhirst and his workers started building up the programme. This does not necessarily shut out outside assistance altogether. The specific function of the external agency should be to find out the special problems of the village, to find out a solution for them at the research centre and to communicate the technical knowledge, thus gained, to the villagers for their use. In substance, therefore, external assistance was to be limited to transmission of technical knowledge alone.

There are some basic differences in Tagore's concept of community development and the community development programme of the Government of India introduced in the first five-year plan and that is

- i) lack of emotional appeal. Tagore links up the voluntary work with the emotion of love or religious veneration and as a result a course is undertaken in a mood of seriousness and respect for the welfare of the people whom we love and respect. His theory was that "the best way to offer service to God was to serve man because God is intimately manifest to man as man." Tagore would further say, "God as revealed in humanity in general and in particular in the underprivileged classes should receive our service." If one equates service to man as service to God then the antagonism between religion and what may be called positivistic humanism can be reconciled. In a poem in Gitanjali Tagore said, "My heart can never find its way to where thou keepest company with the companionless among the poorest, the lowliest and the lost." Tagore's religion was service to man. This idea was the basis of self-less voluntary work which he

called *Viswa karma* (universal work) and the social worker *Viswa karma* whose main approach is to serve the community not the individuals. In other words what is good for community is good for the individual. When the relationship between community or society and the individual is understood it provides inspiration to the individual to develop his power without sacrificing his individuality and yet at the same time, to be able to serve his community. And b) not receiving any benefit himself. I remember what Father Alfanso (one of the founding fathers of community college movement in India) once said that the unemployed teachers are trained and given the proper vision that if they set their eyes and heart on salary they can never be true community college teachers. However, in Tagore's scheme of rural reconstruction the material aspect was not left out – it received explicit emphasis. Tagore always thought “true happiness depends more on the habit of the mind than on the size of the purse.” For Tagore the task of rural reconstruction was to rebuild man. (City and Village, P. 25).). His thesis was that a lighted lamp is for us the end, not a lump of gold.”

- ii) Tagore decided that approach to rural problems should be integrated and not piecemeal. “No regeneration could be real unless it was all-round.” Community Development programme of Government of India is also multipurpose in character and it is at the same time shaped as a self help programme. Tagore would say that the best way of helping others is to help them to help themselves.

Though Tagore would stop us from begging anything from the British and develop self-reliance but that did not mean that Tagore wanted us to shut out outside assistance altogether but what he desired that the external assistance was to be limited to transmission of technical knowledge.

In Tagore's concept of community development there is an added element of joy and happiness. He found the life in villages dull and dreary, no joy. For Tagore joy was both an end in itself and a means to an end. We live for the sake of joy. At the same time each of us gives our best only when there is joy within. A well-known song which is sung at the functions of Sriniketan runs as follows:

The sun shines, the rain pours down in showers,
 The leaves glisten in the bamboo grove,
 The smell of the newly tilled earth fills the air,
 Our hands are strong, our hearts glad,
 as we toil from morning till night to plough the land.

These lines not only show Tagore's sympathy for the peasant, but his desire to lend dignity to his work and to lighten the burden by introducing joy and music into it. He would say, "The Poverty problem is not the most important, the problem of unhappiness is the great problem." (City and Village, P.24).

For Tagore, the two experiments, pedagogic at Shantiniketan and agricultural at Sriniketan or cultural and rural were vitally linked. What he tried to work out in Shantiniketan and at Surul, Sriniketan, was an integrated programme in which culture of the mind and the culture of the soil went hand in hand. Tagore never wanted that Shantiniketan should grow as a cultural oasis in the midst of an arid waste of decaying humanity. It never seemed right to him. How to build a living and fruitful network of communication between the two had long troubled him.

It is a pity that this very real concern of his has somehow failed to receive due appreciation from his people. Is it because it was overshadowed, partly by his own glamour as a poet and partly by Mahatma Gandhi's mystic cult of the charkha?

Tagore's active concern with this problem was prior to the Mahatma's, dating from the nineties of the 19th century when he had first come face to face with the grim tragedy of the village economy while looking after his family estates in north-east Bengal. Though he lacked the Mahatma's singular power of dramatizing every issue into a national crusade, his practical approach to the actual problem was both more realistic and more comprehensive. He believed in the intelligent application of scientific technique as necessary for the development of Indian agriculture and of small scale rural industries. This belief, rather than the magic of charkha, has been amply vindicated by what has happened in many parts of India today. On the other hand, he shared the Mahatma's gospel of self-help and his faith in the dignity of manual labour, however seemingly low. Indeed had the Mahatma watched Leonard Elmhirst and his boys carrying latrine buckets to empty them into manure pits, he would have hugged them with delight.

It would be interesting to note that Tagore dedicated his book 'The religion of Man' to Dorothy Whitney Straight, daughter of an American millionaire, who later married Leonard Elmhirst and also endowed Sriniketan with a permanent fund to put Sriniketan on its feet financially.

The last point of discussion is community colleges. The community college is largely a phenomenon of 20th Cen. American higher education. Community colleges are comprehensive institutions that provide

- i) general and liberal education

- ii) career and vocational education
- iii) adult and continuing education

One can cite O'Banion's six principles of the learning community College

- i) creating substantive change in individual learners,
- ii) engaging learners as full partners in the learning process,
- iii) creating and offering as many options for learning as possible,
- iv) assisting learners in forming and participating in collaborative learning projects,
- v) defining the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners,
- vi) documenting improved and expanded learning for its learners, the only way the learning college and its facilitators succeed.

In America community colleges are people's colleges, they give equal access and opportunity especially to people who come from different parts of the world. Flexibility and cost effectiveness are the hallmark of these colleges. It is useful in Indian condition where there is rampant unemployment among the graduate youths. The community college movement which started in 1995 by Father Alphonso has since been growing in India. Father Alphonso adapted the US community college system but added elements that make it applicable to our local indigenous people. Infusing self-confidence, self esteemed, self motivation in the students coming from socially, economically, educationally backward groups. The primary objective of the Jesuit Father, Alphonso was to start the community college movement in India for training the "backward people" described by most as the poorest of the poor of India's people and today there are 153 community colleges

across 17 states. It is now a national phenomenon empowering individuals, who were devoid of the conventional education system, through skill development with the help of local industry and community.

“Do not go my love” is a poem by Tagore which is made into a song by Richard Hageman and sung in the shoreline community college sets the mood of these colleges, which are on one side, provide education for livelihood and, on the other side, these colleges are based on the whole philosophy that merit is an opportunity and excellence is developing the latent potential in the individual person by giving him/her the right type of opportunity at the right time in his/her life. The slogan of Leap Outreach Programme in Loyala College, Chennai ‘Fit for life and fit for job’ reflects that life is not one sided but a comprehensive whole where work and aesthetics go together.

The difference of perception between Tagore’s rural reconstruction programme and community colleges’ philosophy is that Tagore’s programme was dedicated to community farming and development of the village economy and on the contrary the rationale behind community colleges is to enhance skilled labour force, but at the same time to empower individuals to improve the quality of life for individuals, communities and the nation. Tagore harboured a strong feeling to do something for the poor people of the villages but at the same time he would say, “It is not enough to try to remove wants. You can never remove them completely from the outside; the far greater thing is to rouse the will of the people to remove their own wants. Today the Ministry of Human Resource Development has borrowed some of Tagore’s ideas, immortalized as the objective s of Visva-Bharati, in drafting the guiding aims of the promised new institutions formally referred now as ‘Innovation Universities’. These guiding principles, as

given below, if added into the philosophy of Indian community colleges, it would definitely give a true and comprehensive conceptual vision in the development of community college movement in India:

- i) Boundary-less pursuit of knowledge for the greater good of man;
- ii) To study the mind of man in its realization of different aspects of truth, from diverse points of view;
- iii) To strive for spiritual realization, amity, cooperation, and comprehension of ideas of thinkers from different cultures;
- iv) Harmonizing the cultures of India.

If these ideas become a part of community college philosophy, which primarily promotes job oriented, work related, skill-based and life coping education, it would definitely turn into an alternative holistic education system and a true man making education.