My School

Rabindranath Tagore
My School

I have been told that you would like to hear of the educational mission I have taken up, but it will be difficult for me to give you a distinct idea of my institution which has grown gradually during the last twenty-four years. With it my own mind has grown and my own ideal of education has come to its fullness, so slowly and so naturally, that I find it difficult now to analyse and put it before you.

The first question you may all ask is: what urged me to take up education. I had spent most of my time in literary pursuits till I was forty or more. I had never any desire to take my part in practical work, because I had a rooted conviction in my mind that I had not the gift. Perhaps you know the facts, or shall I make a confession? When I was thirteen, I finished going to school. I do not want to boast about it, I merely give it to you as a historical fact.

So long as I was forced to do so, I felt the torture of going to school unsupportable. I often used to count the years that must pass before I should find my freedom. My elder brothers had passed through their academic career and were engaged in life, each in his own way. How I used to envy them, when, after a hurried meal in the morning, I found the inevitable carriage, that took us to school, ready at the gate. How I wished that, by some magical spell, I could cross the intervening fifteen or twenty years and suddenly become a grown-up man.

I afterwards realised that what then weighed on my mind was the unnatural pressure of the system of education, which prevailed everywhere.

Children's minds are sensitive to the influence of the great world to which they have been born. Their subconscious mind is active, always imbibing some lesson, and with it realising the joy of knowing. This sensitive receptivity of their passive mind
helps them, without their feeling any strain, to master language that most complex and
difficult instrument of expression, full of ideas that are undefinable and symbols that
deal with abstractions. And through their natural gift of guessing they learn the meaning
of words which we cannot explain.

But it is just at this critical period that the child’s life is brought into the educational
factory—lifeless, colourless, dissociated from the context of the universe, within bare
white walls staring like eyeballs of the dead. We had the God-given gift of taking
delight in the world, but such delightful activity was fettered and imprisoned, stilled by
a force called discipline which kills the sensitivity of the child mind, the mind which is
always on the alert, restless and eager to receive first-hand knowledge from mother
Nature. We had to sit inert, like dead specimens of some museum, whilst lessons were
pelted at us from on high, like hailstones on flowers.

I rebelled, young as I was. Of course this was an awful thing for a child to do—
the child of a respectable family! My elders did not know how to deal with this
phenomenon. They tried all kinds of persuasion, vigorous and gentle, until at last I
was despaired of and set free. Through the joy of my freedom, I felt a real urging to
teach myself. I undertook the task of playing schoolmaster to myself, and found it to
be a delightful game. I pored over any books that came my way, not school-selected
text-books that I did not understand, and I filled up the gaps of understanding out of
my own imagination. The result may have been quite different from the author’s
meaning, but the activity itself had its own special value.

At the age of twelve, I was first coerced into learning English. You will admit that
neither its spelling, nor its syntax, is perfectly rational. The penalty for this I had to
pay, without having done anything to deserve it, with the exception of being born ignorant.

When in the evening time my English teacher used
to come, with what trepidation I waited! I would be yearning
to go to my mother and ask her to tell me a fairy story, but
instead I had to go and get my text-book, with its
unprepossessing black binding, and chapters of lessons,
followed by rows of separated syllables with accent marks
like soldier’s bayonets. As for that teacher, I can never
forgive him. He was so inordinately conscientious! He insisted on coming every single
evening, there never seemed to be either illness or death in his family. He was so
preposterously punctual too. I remember how the fascination for the frightful attracted
me every evening to the terrace facing the road; and, just at the right moment, his
umbrella, for bad weather never prevented him coming, would appear at the bend of our lane.

One day I discovered, in a library belonging to one of my brothers, a copy of Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop*. I persisted in reading it, and, with the help of the illustrations supplemented by contributions made by my own imagination, I made out some kind of a story. In this manner, with no help from any teacher, but just as a child learns by sheer guessing, I went on reading and reading and a twilight atmosphere of colourful vision was produced in my mind.

This was the experience of my own young days and I believe that a large part of such success or reputations I may have acquired, I owe to that early freedom, won with wilfulness.

In our childhood we imbibe our lessons with the aid of our whole body and mind, with all the senses fully active and eager. When we are sent to school, the doors of natural information are closed to us: our eyes see the letters, our ears hear the abstract lessons, not the perpetual stream of ideas which form the heart of nature, because the teachers in their wisdom think that these bring distraction, that they have no great purpose behind them.

When we accept any discipline for ourselves, we try to avoid taking in anything except what is necessary for our purpose; and it is this purposefulness, which belongs to the adult mind, that we force upon the children in school. We say, 'Never keep your mind alert, attend to what is before you, what has been given to you.' This becomes torture to the child, because it goes against Nature's purpose, and Nature, the greatest of all teachers, is thwarted at every stop by the human teacher who believes in machine-made lessons and not in the lessons of life, so that the whole growth of the child's mind is not only hurt, but forcibly spoilt.

I believe that children should be surrounded with the things of Nature, which have their own educational value. Their minds should be allowed to stumble on and be surprised at everything that happens in the life of to-day. The new to-morrow will stimulate their attention with new facts of life. This is the best method for the child. But what happens in school is, that every day, at the same hour, the same book is brought and poured out for him. His attention is never hit by the chance surprises which come from learning from Nature.

How quickly the child, left to himself, is capable of gathering facts! In its early
days it is always picking them up; and even if, for the time being, it does not grasp all their meaning, yet because of the immense receptiveness of the subconscious memory, nothing that passes across the mind really ever leaves it. Our grown-up mind is always full of the things we have to arrange and deal with, and therefore the things that happen around us, the coming of morning, celebrated with music and flowers, leave no mark upon us. We do not allow them to, for our minds are really crowded; the stream of lessons perpetually flowing from the heart of Nature does not touch us, we merely choose those which are useful, rejecting the rest as undesirable because we want the shortest cut to success.

Children have no such distractions. With them every new fact or event comes to a mind that is always open, with an abundant hospitality; and, through this exuberant, indiscriminate acceptance, they learn innumerable facts within a very short time, amazing compared with our own slowness. These are most important lessons of life which are thus learnt, and what is still more wonderful is, that the greater part of them are abstract truths. I cannot even imagine how it is possible for a child to understand abstract ideas through mere guessing, to master that most complex organism of expression, our language, while its mind is so immature.

Knowing something of the natural school which Nature herself supplies to all her creatures, I chose a delightful spot and used to hold my classes under some big shady tree. I taught them all I could. I played with them. In the evening I recited our ancient epics and sang my own songs. I trusted to the presence of the spirit of freedom in the atmosphere. I had to fight the teachers who assisted me, who had been brought up in a different environment to that of mine, who had no faith in freedom, who believed that it was impertinence for the boys to be boys.

Then I tried to create an atmosphere of culture. I invited renowned artists from the city to live at the school, leaving them free to produce their own work, which I allowed the boys and girls to watch if they so felt inclined. It was the same with my own work. All the time I was composing songs and poems, and would often invite the teachers around, to sing or read with them. Our boys would also come, and peep in since they were not invited, and listen to the poems and songs fresh from the heart of their composer. This helped to create an atmosphere from which they could imbibe something impalpable, but life-giving.

We have there the open beauty of the sky, and the different seasons revolve before our eyes in all the magnificence of their colour. Through this perfect touch with nature
we took the opportunity of instituting festivals of the seasons. When nature herself sends her message, we ought to acknowledge its compelling force. When the kiss of rain thrilled the heart of the surrounding trees, if we had still behaved with undue propriety and paid all our attention to mathematics, it would have been positively wrong, impious.

The seasons of the rains often brought us unexpected release from duty. Some voice suddenly would proclaim from the sky: "To-day is your holiday!" We submitted gladly and would run wildly away. Such sympathy is so easily crushed by routine which takes no count of nature's claims, and does not keep open the path for this great world to find its place in the soul of man. I do not believe in such barbarity.

Our children began to be of service to our neighbours, to help them in various ways and to be in constant touch with the life around them. They had their own freedom to grow, which is the greatest possible gift for the child life. There was also another kind of freedom at which we aimed, the freedom of sympathy with all humanity, a freedom from all racial and national prejudice.

The sympathies of children, like the undergrowth of a forest, are allowed to cling to the dust of the soil to which they belong and not to grow up to that height from which they can send their branches in all directions. Therefore their hearts remain stunted, incapable of understanding other people with different languages and customs. This causes us, when our growing souls demand it, to grope after each other in darkness, to hurt each other in ignorance, to suffer from the worst form of blindness of this age. The missionaries themselves have contributed to this evil. In the name of brotherhood and in the arrogance of their sectarian pride, they create misunderstanding. This they make permanent in their text-books and poison the minds of children. The worst of fetters come when children lose their freedom of sympathy.

I have tried to save children from such vicious methods of alienating their minds which are fostered through books, through histories, geographies and lessons full of national prejudices. I have done it with the help of friends from the West. In the East there is a great deal of bitter resentment against Western races, which rankles in our hearts, and in our own homes we are brought up in feelings of hatred. I have tried to save the children from that and these friends from the West, with their understanding, with their human sympathy and love, have done us a great service.

We are building up our institution upon the ideal of the spiritual unity of all races. I want to build it with the help of all other races, and when I was on the continent of
Europe, I appealed to those great countries, to their scholars, and I was fortunate enough to receive their help. They also came to this institution, which is poor in material things, leaving their own centres of learning, and spent a year or more with us, helping to build it up.

I have in mind not merely a University that is only one of the aspects of our Visva-Bharati, but I hope this is going to be a great meeting place for individuals from all countries who believe in our spiritual unity and who have suffered from the lack of it, who want to make atonement and come into human touch with their neighbours. Such idealists there are and when I travelled in the West, even in out-of-the-way places, many unknown persons of no special reputation wanted to join this work.

When the races come together, as they have done in the present age, it should not be merely the gathering of a crowd. There must be some bond of relation, otherwise they will knock against one another.

Our education must enable every child to grasp and to fulfil this purpose of the age, not to defeat it by acquiring the habit of creating divisions, and of cherishing national prejudices. There are of course natural differences in human races which should be preserved and respected and the mission of our education should be to realise our unity in spite of them, to discover truth through the wilderness of their contradictions.

This we have tried to do in Visva-Bharati. Our endeavour has been to include this ideal of unity in all the activities in our institution, some educational, some that comprise different kinds of artistic expression, some in the shape of service to our neighbours by way of helping the reconstruction of village life. As I wanted this institution to be inter-racial, I invited there great minds from the West. They cordially responded, and some have come permanently to join hands with us and build a place where men of all nations and countries may find their true home, without molestation from the prosperous who are always afraid of idealism or from the politically powerful who are always suspicious of men who have the freedom of spirit.

May 1925
A Poet’s School

FROM QUESTIONS that have often been put to me, I have come to feel that the public claims an apology from the poet for having founded a school, as I in my rashness have done. One must admit that the silk-worm which spins and the butterfly that floats on the air represent two different stages of existence, contrary to each other. The silk-worm seems to have a cash value credited in its favour somewhere in Nature’s accounting department, according to the amount of the task it performs. 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 Treasurer of colours, who has nothing to do with the account book and has a perfect mastery in the great art of wastefulness.

The poet may be compared to that foolish butterfly. He also tries to translate all the festive colours of creation in the vibration of his verses. Then why should he imprison himself in an interminable coil of duty, bringing out some good, tough and fairly respectable result? Why should he make himself accountable to those sane people who would judge the merit of his produce by the amount of profit it will bring?

I suppose this individual poet’s answer would be, that when he brought together a few boys, one sunny day in winter, among the warm shadows of the sal trees, strong, straight and tall, with branches of a dignified moderation, he started to write a poem in a medium not of words.

In these self-conscious days of psychoanalysis clever minds have discovered the secret spring of poetry in some obscure stratum of repressed freedom, in some constant fretfulness of thwarted self-realization. Evidently in this case they were right. The phantom of my long-ago boyhood did come to haunt the ruined opportunities of its early beginning; it sought to live in the lives of other boys, to build up its missing
paradise, as only children can do with ingredients which may not have any orthodox material, prescribed measure, or standard value.

This brings to my mind the name of another poet of ancient India, Kalidasa—the story of whose life has not been written, but can easily be guessed. Fortunately for the scholars, he has left behind him no clear indication of his birth-place, and thus they have a subject that time has left vacant for an endless variety of disagreement. My scholarship does not pretend to go deep, but I remember having read somewhere that he was born in beautiful Kashmir. Since then I have left off reading discussions about his birth-place for fear of meeting with some learned contradiction equally convincing. Anyhow it is perfectly in the fitness of things that Kalidasa should be born in Kashmir—and I envy him, for I was born in Calcutta.

But psycho-analysis need not be disappointed, for he was banished from there to a city in the plain—and his whole poem of Meghaduta reverberates with the music of a sorrow that had its crown of suffering 'in remembering happier things'. Is it not significant that in this poem, the lover's errant fancy, in its quest of the beloved who dwelt in the paradise of eternal beauty, lingered with a deliberate delay of enjoyment round every hill, stream, or forest over which it passed; watched the grateful dark eyes of the peasant girls welcoming the rain-laden clouds of June; listened to some village elder reciting under the banyan tree a well-known love legend that ever remained fresh with the tears and smiles of generations of simple hearts? Do we not feel in all this the prisoner of the stony-hearted city revelling in a vision of joy that, in his imaginary journey, followed him from hill to hill, waited at every turn of the path which bore the finger-posts to a heaven for separated lovers banished on the earth?

It was not a physical home-sickness from which the poet suffered, it was something far more fundamental—a home-sickness of the soul. We feel in almost all his works the oppressive atmosphere of the King's palaces of those days, impervious with things of luxury, thick with the callousness of self-indulgence, albeit an atmosphere of refined culture, of an extravagant civilization.

The poet in the royal court lived in banishment—banishment from the immediate presence of the eternal. He knew, it was not merely his own banishment, but that of the whole age to which he was born, the age that had gathered its wealth and missed its well-being, built its storehouse of things and lost its background of the great universe. What was the form in which his desire for perfection persistently appeared in his drama and poems? It was in that of the taposana, the forest dwelling of the partia...
community of ancient India. Those who are familiar with Sanskrit literature well know that this was not a colony of people with a primitive culture and mind. They were seekers of truth, for the sake of which they lived in an atmosphere of purity, but not of Puritanism; of the simple life, but not the life of self-mortification. They did not advocate celibacy and they had constant inter-communication with the other people who had to live the life of worldly interest. Their aim and endeavour have briefly been suggested in the Upanishad in these lines:

Te sarvagam sarvatah prayya dhira yuktatmanah sarvamevavantis.

Those men of serene mind enter into the All, having realized and being everywhere in union with the omnipresent Spirit.

It was never a philosophy of renunciation of a negative character, but of a realization completely comprehensive. However, the tortured mind of Kalidasa, in the prosperous city of Ujjaini and the glorious period of Vikramaditya, closely pressed by all-obstructing things and all-devouring self, made his thoughts hover round the vision of tapovana for his inspiration of life, light and freedom.

It was not a deliberate copy, but a natural coincidence, that a poet of modern India also had a similar vision when he felt within him the misery of a spiritual banishment. In the time of Kalidasa the people vividly believed in the ideal of tapovana, the forest colony, and there can be no doubt that even in that late age there were communities of men living in the heart of nature, not ascetics fiercely in love with a lingering suicide, but men of serene sanity who sought to realize the spiritual meaning of their life. And therefore when Kalidasa sang of the tapovana, his poems found their immediate communion in the living faith of his hearers. But today the idea of the tapovana has lost any definite outline of reality, and has retreated into the far-away phantom land of legend, therefore, in a modern poem, it would merely be poetical, its meaning judged by a literary standard or appraisal. Then again, the spirit of the tapovana in the purity of its original shape would be a fantastic anachronism in the present age. Therefore, in order to be real, it must find its reincarnation under modern conditions of life, and be the same in truth, not merely identical in fact. It was this which made the modern poet’s heart crave to compose his poem in a tangible language. But I must give the history in some detail.

Civilized man has come far away from the orbit of his normal life. He has gradually formed and intensified some habits, that are like those of the bees, for adapting himself to his hive-world. We so often see modern men suffering from ennui, from world-
weariness, from a spirit of rebellion against their environment for no reasonable cause whatever. Social revolutions are constantly ushered in with a suicidal violence that has its origins in our dissatisfaction with our hive-wall arrangement—the too exclusive enclosure that deprives us of the perspective, which is so much needed to give us the proper proportion in our art of living. All this is an indication that man has not really been moulded in the model of the bee, and therefore he becomes recklessly anti-social when his freedom to be more than social is ignored.

Under our highly complex modern conditions, mechanical forces are organized with such efficiency that the materials produced grow far in advance of man’s selective and assimilative capacity to simplify them into harmony with his nature and needs. Such an intemperate overgrowth of things, like the rank vegetation 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, fast developing his parasitism on the monster, *Thing*, which he allows to envelop him on all sides. He is always occupied in adapting himself to its dead angularities, limits himself to its limitations, and merely becomes a part of it.

This talk of mine may seem too oriental to some of my hearers who, I am told, believe that a constant high pressure of living, produced by an artificially cultivated hunger for things, generates and feeds the energy that drives civilization upon its endless journey. Personally, I do not believe that this has ever been the principal driving force, leading to its eminence any great civilization of which we know in history. But I have broached this subject not for a full discussion, but to explain the conduct of a poet who has trespassed into a domain generally reserved for the expert and for those who have academic distinction.

I was born in what was then the metropolis of British India. My ancestors came floating to Calcutta upon the earliest tide of the fluctuating fortune of the East India Company. The conventional code of life for our family thereupon became a confluence of three cultures: the Hindu, the Mahomedan and the British. My grandfather belonged to that period when an amplitude of dress and courtesy and generous leisure were gradually being clipped and curtailed into Victorian manners, economical in time, in ceremonies and in the dignity of personal appearance. This will show that I came to a world, in which the modern city-bred spirit of progress had just begun driving its triumphal car over the luscious green life of our ancient village community.

Though the trampling process was almost complete around me, yet the wailing
cry of the past was still lingering over the wreckage. I had often listened to my eldest brother describing with the poignancy of a hopeless regret a society hospitable, sweet with the old-world aroma of natural kindliness, full of a simple faith and the ceremonial poetry of life. But all this was a vanishing shadow behind me in the golden haze of a twilight horizon—the all-pervading fact around my boyhood being the modern city, newly built by a Company of Western traders, and the spirit of the modern time seeking its unaccustomed path into our life, stumbling against countless anomalies. But it always is a surprise to me to think that though this close-up harshness of a city was my only experience of the world, yet my mind was constantly haunted by the home-sick fancies of an exile.

It seems that the sub-conscious remembrance of some primeval dwelling-place (where in our ancestor’s 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 shadow-haunted living reminiscence in me seemed to ache for the pre-natal cradle and playground it 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 cocoanut 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 companionship which the great brotherhood of trees has ever offered to man. They made my heart wistful with the invitation of the forest. I had the good fortune to answer this invitation in person a few years later when, a boy of ten, I stood alone on the Himalayas under the shade of great deodars, awed by the dark dignity of life’s first-born aristocracy, by a fortitude that was terrible as well as courteous.

Looking back upon those moments of my boyhood days, when my mind seemed to float poised upon a large feeling of the sky, of the light, and to mingle with the brown earth in its glistening grass, I cannot help believing that my Indian ancestry has left deep in my being the legacy of its philosophy; the philosophy which speaks of fulfilment through a harmony with all things. For good or for evil such a harmony has, the effect of arousing a great desire in us to seek our freedom, not in the man-made world but in the depth of the universe, and makes us offer our reverence to the divinity inherent in fire, water and trees, in everything moving and growing. The founding of my school had its origin in the memory of that longing for freedom, the memory which seems to go back beyond the sky-line of my birth.
Freedom in the mere sense of independence has no content, and therefore no meaning. Perfect freedom lies in the perfect harmony of relationship which we realize in this world—not through our response to it in knowing but in the being. Objects of knowledge maintain an infinite distance from us who are the knowers. For knowledge is not union. Therefore the farther world of freedom awaits us where we reach truth, not through feeling it by our senses, or knowing it by reason, but through the union of perfect sympathy.

Children with the freshness of their senses come directly to an intimacy with this world. This is the first great gift they have. They must accept it naked and simple, and must never again lose their power of immediate communication with it. For our perfection we have to be vitally savage and mentally civilized; we should have the gift to be natural with Nature and with human society. The misery which I felt was due to the crowded solitude in which I dwelt in a city where man was everywhere, with never a gap for the immense non-human. My banished soul sitting in the civilized isolation of town-life cried within me for the enlargement of the horizon of its comprehension. I was like the torn-away line of a verse, always in a state of suspense, while the other line, with which it rhymed and which could give it fullness, was smudged away into some misty, indecipherable distance. The inexpensive power to be happy which, along with other children, I brought with me to this world, was being constantly worn away by friction with the brick-and-mortar arrangement of life, by mechanical habit and a code of customary respectability.

In the usual course I was sent to school, but possibly my suffering was unusual, greater than that of most other children. The non-civilized in me was sensitive; it had a great thirst for colour, for music, for the movement of life. Our city-built education took no heed of that living fact. It had its luggage-van waiting for branded bales of marketable result. The relative proportion of the non-civilized and civilized in man should be in the proportion of water and land on our globe, the former predominating. But the school had for its object a continual reclamation of the non-civilized. Such a drain of the fluid element caused an aridity which may not be considered deplorable under city conditions. But my nature never got accustomed to those conditions, to the callous decency of the pavement. The non-civilized triumphed in me only too soon and drove me away from my school when I had just entered my teens. I found myself stranded on a solitary island of ignorance, and had to rely solely upon my own instincts to build up an education for myself from the very beginning.
This reminds me that when I was young I had the great good fortune to come upon a Bengali translation of *Robinson Crusoe*. I still believe that this is one of the best books for boys that has ever been written. I have already spoken in this paper about my longing when young to run away from my own self and be one with everything in Nature. I have described this mood as particularly Indian, the outcome of a traditional desire for the expansion of consciousness. One has to admit that such a desire is too subjective in its character, but this is inevitable in our geographical circumstances. We live under the extortionate tyranny of the tropics, paying heavy toll every moment for the barest right of existence. The heat, the damp, the unspeakable fecundity of minute life feeding upon big life, the perpetual sources of irritation, visible and invisible, leave very little margin of capital for extravagant experiments.

Excess of energy seeks obstacles for its self-realization. That is why we find so often in Western literature a constant emphasis upon the malignant aspect of Nature, in whom the people of the West seem to delight to discover an enemy for the sheer enjoyment of challenging her to fight. The reason which made Alexander express his desire to find other worlds to conquer when his conquest in this world was completed, makes these enormously vital people desire, when they have some respite in their sublime mission of fighting against objects that are noxious, to go out of their way to spread their coat-tails in other peoples' thoroughfares and to claim indemnity when these are trodden upon. In order to take the thrilling risk of hurting themselves they are ready to welcome endless trouble to hurt others who are inoffensive, the beautiful birds which happen to know how to fly away, the timid beasts which have the advantage of inhabiting inaccessible regions, and— but I avoid the discourtesy of mentioning higher races in this connection.

Life's fulfilment finds constant contradictions in its path, but these are necessary for the sake of its advance. The stream is saved from the sluggishness of its current by the perpetual opposition of the soil through which it must cut its way and which forms its banks. The spirit of fight belongs to the genius of life. The tuning of an instrument has to be done, not because it reveals a proficient perseverance in the face of difficulty, but because it helps music to be perfectly realized. Let us rejoice that, in the West, life's instrument is being tuned in all its different chords, owing to the great fact that the West has a triumphant pleasure in its struggle of contest with obstacles. The spirit of creation in the heart of the universe will never allow, for its own sake, obstacles to be completely removed. It is only because positive truth lies in that ideal
of perfection, which has to be won by our own endeavour in order to make it our own, that the spirit of fight is great, and not in the exhibition of a muscular athleticism or the rude barbarism of a ravenous rapacity.

In *Robinson Crusoe*, the delight of the union with Nature finds its expression in a story of adventure in which the solitary man is face to face with solitary Nature, coaxing her, co-operating with her, exploring her secrets, using all his faculties to win her help. The joy I felt in reading this book was not in sharing the pride of a human success against the closed fist of a parsimonious Nature, but in the active realization of harmony with her through intelligently determined dealings, the natural conclusion of which was success. And this is the heroic love-adventure of the West, the active wooing of the earth.

I remember how in my youth the feeling of intense delight and wonder once followed me in my railway journey across Europe from Brindisi to Calais, when I realized the vast beauty of this continent everywhere blossoming in a glow of health and richness under the age-long attention of her chivalrous lover, Western humanity. He had gained her, made her his own, unlocked the inexhaustible generosity of her heart. And I had intently wished that the introspective vision of the universal soul, which an Eastern devotee realizes in the solitude of his mind, could be united with this spirit of outward expression in service, the exercise of will in unfolding the wealth of beauty and well-being from its shy obscurity to the light.

I remember the morning when a beggar woman in a Bengal village gathered in the loose end of her sari the stale flowers that were about to be thrown away from the vase on my table; and with an ecstatic expression of tenderness she buried her face in them, exclaiming 'Ah, Beloved of my Heart!' Her eyes could easily pierce the veil of the outward form and reach the realm of the infinite in these flowers where she found the intimate touch of her Beloved. But in spite of it all she lacked that energy of worship, the Western form of direct divine service which helps the earth to bring out her flowers and to spread the reign of beauty on the desolate dust. I refuse to think that the twin spirits of the East and the West, the Mary and Martha, can never meet to make perfect the realization of truth. In spite of our material poverty and the antagonism of time I wait patiently for this meeting.

*Robinson Crusoe's* island comes to my mind when I think of an institution, where the first great lesson in the perfect union of man and Nature, not only through love but through active communication, can be had unobstructed. We have to keep in mind the fact that love and action are the only media through which perfect knowledge
can be obtained, for the object of knowledge is not pedantry but wisdom. The primary object of an institution of this kind should not merely be to educate one's limbs and mind to be in efficient readiness for all emergencies, but to be in perfect tune in the symphony of response between life and world, to find the balance of their harmony which is wisdom. The first important lesson for children in such a place would be that of improvisation, the constant imposition of the ready-made having been banished therefrom in order to give constant occasions to explore one's capacity through surprises of achievement. I must make it plain that this means a lesson not in simple life, but in creative life. For life may grow complex, and yet if there is a living personality in its centre, it will still have the unity of creation, it will carry its own weight in perfect grace, and will not be a mere addition to the number of the facts that only go to swell a crowd.

I wish I could say that we have fully realized my dream in our school. We have only made the first introduction towards it and have given an opportunity to the children to find their freedom in Nature by being able to love it. For love is freedom; it gives us that fullness of existence which saves us from paying with our soul for objects that are immensely cheap. Love lights up this world with its meaning and makes life feel that it has everywhere that enough which truly is its feast. I know men who preach the cult of simple life by glorifying the spiritual merit of poverty. I refuse to imagine any special value in poverty when it is a mere negation. Only when the mind has the sensitiveness to be able to respond to the deeper call of reality, is it naturally weaned away from the lure of the fictitious value of things. It is callousness which robs us of our simple power to enjoy, and dooms us to the indignity of snobbish pride in furniture and the foolish burden of expensive things. But to pit the callousness of asceticism against the callousness of luxury is merely fighting one evil with the help of another, inviting the pitiless demon of the desert in place of the indiscriminate demon of the jungle.

I tried my best to develop in the children of my school the freshness of their feeling for Nature, a sensitiveness of soul in their relationship with their human surroundings, with the help of literature, festive ceremonials and also the religious teaching which enjoins us to come to the nearer presence of the world through the soul, thus to gain it more than can be measured—like gaining an instrument, not merely by having it, but by producing music upon it. I prepared for my children a real home-coming into this world. Among other subjects learnt in the open air under the shade of trees they had their music and picture-making; they had their dramatic performances, activities that were the expressions of life.
But as I have already hinted this was not sufficient, and I waited for men and the means to be able to introduce into our school an active vigour of work, the joyous exercise of our inventive and constructive energies that help to build up character and by their constant movements naturally sweep away all accumulations of dirt, decay and death. In other words, I always felt the need of the Western genius for imparting to my educational ideal that strength of reality which knows how to clear the path towards a definite end of practical good.

For me the obstacles were numerous. The tradition of the community which calls itself educated, the parents' expectations, the up-bringing of the teachers themselves, the claim and the constitution of the official University, were all overwhelmingly arrayed against the idea I had cherished. In addition to this, our funds which had all but failed to attract contribution from my countrymen were hardly adequate to support an institution in which the number of boys must necessarily be small.

Fortunately help came to us from an English friend who took the leading part in creating and guiding the rural organization work connected with the Visva-Bharati. He believes, as I do, in an education which takes count of the organic wholeness of human individuality that needs for its health a general stimulation to all its faculties, bodily and mental. In order to have the freedom to give effect to this idea we started our work with a few boys, who either were orphans or whose parents were too destitute to be able to send them to any school whatever.

Before long we discovered that minds actively engaged in a round of constructive work fast developed energies which sought eager outlets in the pursuit of knowledge, even in undertaking extra tasks for such a mechanical result as the perfecting of handwriting. The minds of these boys became so alive to all passing events that a very simple fact made them at once realize the advantage of learning English, which was not in their programme. The suggestion came to them one day while posting their letters, as they watched the post-master writing on their envelopes in English the addresses that had already been written in Bengali. Immediately they went to their teacher claiming to be taught English in an additional hour and, what is still more amazing, these brave boys do not yet repent of their rashness in this choice of their lesson. Do not I remember to this day what violently criminal thoughts possessed my infant mind, when my own teacher of English made his appearance at the bend of the lane leading to our house?

For these boys vacation has no meaning. Their studies, though strenuous, are not a task, being permeated by a holiday spirit which takes shape in activities in their
kitchen, their vegetable garden, their weaving, their work of small repairs. It is because their class-work has not been wrenched away and walled-in from their normal vocation, because it has been made a part of their daily current of life, that it easily carries itself by its own onward flow.

Most of our boys when they first came were weak in the body and weak in mind: the ravages that malaria and other tropical diseases had made in them, through generations of fated inheritance, had left them like a field devastated by years of savage warfare which had turned the soil into anaemic barrenness. They brought with them an intolerable mental perversity, the outcome of vitiated blood and a starved physical constitution. The Brahmin was supercilious, the non-Brahmin pitiable in his shrinking self-abasement. They hated to do any work of common good lest others besides themselves should get the least advantage. They sulked because they were asked to do for their own benefit the kind of work that, according to their idea of fitness, should be done by an ordinary coolie or by a paid cook. They were not ashamed of living upon charity but were ashamed of self-help. Possibly they thought it unjust that we should gain the merit and that they should pay at least a part of the cost.

It might have been thought that this meanness and selfish jealousy, this moral lethargy revealed in the utter want of beneficence in them, were inherent in their nature. But within a very short time all these have been changed. The spirit of sacrifice and comradeship, the disinterested desire to help others, which these boys have developed, are rare even in children who have had better opportunities. It was the active healthy life which brought out in a remarkably quick time all that was good in them, and the accumulated rubbish of impurities was swept off. The daily work which they were doing brought before them moral problems in the concrete shape of difficulties, and claimed solutions from them. The logic of facts showed to them the reality of moral principles in life, and now they feel astonished at instances when other boys do not understand it. They take the utmost delight in cooking, weaving, gardening, improving their surroundings, rendering services to other boys, very often secretly, lest they should feel embarrassed. In ordinary messing organizations members generally clamour for more than is provided to them, but these boys willingly simplify their needs, patiently understand the inevitableness of imperfections. They are made to realize that the responsibility is mostly theirs, and every luxury becomes a burden when a great part of its pressure it not upon other people’s shoulders. Therefore instead of idly grumbling at deficiencies they have to think and manage for themselves.
To improve their dietary they must put extra zest into their vegetable growing. They have tools and their mother wit for their small needs, and though their endeavour is sure to have crude results yet these have a value which exceeds all market prices.

I wish, for the sake of giving an artistic touch of disarray to my description, I could speak of some breakdown in our plan, of some unexpected element of misfit trying to wreck the symmetry of our arrangement. But, in the name of truth, I have to confess that it has not yet happened. Possibly our tropical climate is accountable for this dull calm in our atmosphere, wherefor that excess of energy may be lacking in our boys, which often loves to make a mess of things that are tiresomely pointed out as worthy of protection, like the beautiful peacock pointed out by Indian villagers to the Western lovers of sport. Possibly it is not even too late to hope that this newly built experiment of ours is not going to be too tame a copy of a model paradise for harmless boys. I am sure, before long, some incalculable problems of life will make their appearance to challenge our theories and to try our faith in our ideal with rude contradictions.

In the meanwhile, having realized that this daily practice in the adaptation of mind and body to life’s necessities has made these boys intellectually alert, we have at last mustered courage to extend this system to the primary section of our school, which is furthest away from the military frontier of our University. The children of this section, under an ideal teacher who realizes that to teach is to learn, have just finished constructing their first hut of which they are absurdly proud. I can see from their manner, they have dimly begun to think that education is a permanent part of the adventure of life, that 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. Thus, I have just had the good fortune to watch the first shoot of life peeping out in a humble corner of our organization. My idea is to allow this climber to grow up, with no special label of learned nomenclature attached to it; grow up till it completely hides the dead pole that bears no natural flower or fruit, but flourishes the parchment flag of examination success.

Before I stop I must say a few more words about a most important item of educational endeavour.

Children have their active sub-conscious mind which, like the tree, has the power to gather its food from the surrounding atmosphere. For them the atmosphere is a great deal more important than rules and methods, building appliances, class teachings and text-books. The earth has her mass of substance in her land and water. But, if I
My Educational Mission

I am an artist and not a man of science and therefore my institution necessarily has assumed the aspect of a work of art and not that of a pedagogical laboratory. And this is the reason why I find it difficult to give men a distinct idea of my work which is continually growing for the last thirty years. With it my own mind has grown and my own ideal of education found freedom to reach its fullness through a vital process so elusive that the picture of its unity cannot be analysed.

Children's minds are sensitive to the influences of the great world to which they have been born. This delicate receptivity of their passive mind helps them, without their feeling any strain, to master language, that most complex instrument of expression, full of ideas that are indefinable and symbols that deal with abstractions. Through their natural gift of guessing, children learn the meaning of the words which we cannot explain.

But it is just at this critical period that the child's life is brought into the education factory, lifeless, colourless, dissociated from the context of the universe, with bare white walls staring like eyeballs of the dead. The children have to sit inert whilst lessons are pelted at them like hailstones on flowers.

I believe that children should be surrounded with the things of nature that have their own educational value. Their minds should be allowed to stumble on and be surprised at everything that happens before them in the life of to-day. The new tomorrow will stimulate their attention with new facts of life.

The minds of the adults are crowded; the stream of lessons perpetually flowing from the heart of nature does not fully touch them; they choose those that are useful, rejecting the rest as inadmissible. The children have no such distractions. With them
may be allowed figurative language, she finds her inspiration of freedom, the stimulation of her life, from her atmosphere. It is, as it were, the envelopment of her perpetual education. It brings from her depth responses in colours and perfume, music and movement, her incessant self-revelation, continual wonders of the unexpected. In his society man has the diffuse atmosphere of culture always about himself. It has the effect of keeping his mind sensitive to his racial inheritance, to the current of influences that come from tradition; it makes it easy for him unconsciously to imbibe the concentrated wisdom of ages. But in our educational organizations we behave like miners, digging only for things substantial, through a laborious process of mechanical toil: and not like a tiller of the soil, whose work is in a perfect collaboration with Nature, in a passive relationship of sympathy with the atmosphere.

However, I tried to create an atmosphere in my institution, giving it the principal place in our programme of teaching. For atmosphere there must be for developing the sensitiveness of soul, for affording mind its true freedom of sympathy. Apathy and ignorance are the worst forms of bondage for man; they are the invisible walls of confinement that we carry round us when we are in their grip. In educational organizations our reasoning faculties have to be nourished in order to allow our mind its freedom in the words of truth, our imagination for the world which belongs to art, and our sympathy for the world of human relationship. This last is even more important than learning the geography of foreign lands.

The minds of children of to-day are almost deliberately made incapable of understanding other people with different languages and customs. This causes us, when our growing souls demand it, to grope after each other in darkness, to hurt each other in ignorance, to suffer from the worst form of the blindness of this age. The Christian missionaries themselves have contributed to this cultivation of insensitiveness and contempt for alien races and civilization. In the name of brotherhood and the blindness of sectarian pride they create misunderstanding. This they make permanent in their text-books and thereby poison the susceptible minds of the young. I have tried to save our children from such a mutilation of natural human love with the help of friends from the West, who, with their sympathetic understanding, have done us the greatest service.

October 1926
every new fact comes to a mind that is always open, with an abundant hospitality. And through this exuberant, indiscriminate acceptance they learn innumerable facts within a short time amazing compared to our own slowness. These are the most important lessons of life that are thus learnt in the first few years of our career.

Because, when I was young I underwent the mechanical pressure of a teaching process, one of man's most cruel and most wasteful mistakes, I felt it my duty to found a school where the children might be free in spite of the school.

At the age of twelve I was first coerced into learning English. Most of Englishmen and Americans are blissfully unconscious of the mercilessness of their language. They will admit, however, that neither its spelling, nor its syntax is perfectly rational. The penalty for this I had to pay, without having done anything to deserve it, with the exception of being born ignorant.

When in the evening my English teacher came I was dragged to my daily doom at a most unsympathetic desk and an unprepossessing text-book containing lessons that are followed by rows of separated syllables with accent marks like soldiers' bayonets. As for that teacher, I can never forgive him. He was so inordinately conscientious! He insisted on coming every single evening—there never seemed to be either illness or death in his family. He was so preposterously punctual too. I remember how the fascination for the frightful attracted me every evening to the terrace facing the road; and just at the right moment, his fateful umbrella—for bad weather never prevented him from coming—would appear at the bend of our lane.

Remembering the experience of my young days, of the school masters and the class rooms, also knowing something of the natural school which Nature herself supplies to all her creatures, I established my institution in a beautiful spot, far away from the town, where the children had the greatest freedom possible under the shade of ancient trees and the field around open to the verge of horizon.

From the beginning I tried to create an atmosphere which I considered to be more important than the class teaching. The atmosphere of nature's own beauty was there waiting for us from a time immemorial with her varied gifts of colours and dance, flowers and fruits, with the joy of her mornings and the peace of her starry nights. I wrote songs to suit the different seasons to celebrate the coming of spring and the resonant season of the rains following the pitiless months of summer. When nature herself sends her message we ought to acknowledge its compelling invitation. If we pay all our dutiful attention to mathematics while the kiss of rain thrills the heart of the surrounding trees, we are ostracized by the spirit of
the universe. Our holidays are unexpected like Nature’s own. Clouds gather above the rows of the palm trees without any previous notice; we gladly submit to its sudden suggestion and run wildly away from our Sanskrit grammar. To alienate our sympathy from the world of birds and trees is a barbarity which is not allowed in my institution.

I invited renowned artists from the city to live at the school, leaving them free to produce their own work which the boys and girls watch if they feel inclined. It is the same with my own work. I compose my songs and poems, and the teachers sit round me and listen. The children are naturally attracted and they peep in and gather, even if they do not fully understand, something fresh from the heart of the composer.

From the commencement of our work we have encouraged our children to be of service to our neighbours from which has grown up a village reconstruction work in our neighbourhood, unique in the whole of India. Round our educational work the villages have grouped themselves in which the sympathy for nature and service for man have become one. In such extension of sympathy and service our mind realizes its true freedom.

Along with this has grown an aspiration for even a higher freedom, a freedom from all racial and national prejudice. Children’s sympathy is often deliberately made narrow and distorted making them incapable of understanding alien peoples with different languages and cultures. This causes us, when our growing souls demand it, to grope after each other in ignorance, to suffer from the blindness of this age. The worst fetters come when children lose their freedom of heart in love.

We are building up our institution upon the ideal of the spiritual unity of all races. I hope, it is going to be a great meeting place for individuals from all countries who believe in the divine humanity, and who wish to make atonement for the cruel disloyalty displayed against her by men. Such idealists I have often met in my travels in the West, unknown persons of no special reputation who suffer and struggle for a cause most often ignored by the clever and the powerful. These nameless individuals, I am sure, will alter the outlook for the future, by them will be ushered a new sunrise of truth and love, like that great personality, who had only a small number of disciples from among the insignificant, and who at the end of his career presented a pitiful picture of utter failure. He was reviled by those in power, unknown by the larger world and suffered an inglorious death, and yet through the symbol of this utmost failure he conquers and lives for ever.

For some time past education has lacked idealism in its mere exercise of an intellect which has no depth of sentiment. The one desire produced in the heart of the students
has been an admission to win success in the world—not to reach some inner standard of perfection, not to obtain self-emancipation.

Let me confess this fact, that I have my faith in higher ideals. At the same time, I have a great feeling of delicacy in giving utterance to them, because of certain modern obstacles. We have now-a-days to be merely commonplace. We have to wait on the reports in the newspapers; representative of the whole machinery which has been growing up all over the world for the making of life superficial. It is difficult to fight through such obstructions and to come to the centre of humanity.

However, I have this one satisfaction that I am at least able to put before the world the mission to which these last years of my life have been devoted. As a servant of the great cause I must be frank and strong in urging upon all this mission. I represent in my institution an ideal of brotherhood, where men of different countries and different languages can come together. I believe in the spiritual unity of man and therefore I ask the world to accept this task from me. Unless it comes and says, ‘We also recognize this ideal’, I shall know that this mission has failed.

June 1931