

Rabindranath Tagore's Model of Rural Reconstruction: A review

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore's unique venture on rural reconstruction at Silaidaha-Patisar and at Sriniketan was a pioneering work carried out by him with the motto of the wholesome development of the community life of village people through education, training, healthcare, sanitation, modern and scientific agricultural production, revival of traditional arts and crafts and organizing fairs and festivities in daily life. He believed that through self-help, self-initiation and self-reliance, village people will be able to help each other in their cooperative living and become able to prepare the ground work for building the nation as an independent country in the true sense. His model of rural reconstruction is the torch-bearer of so many projects in independent India. His principles associated with this programme are still relevant in the present day world, but is not out of criticism. The need is to make critical analysis and throw new lights on this esteemed model so that new programmes can be undertaken based on this to achieve 'life in its completeness' among rural population in India.

Keywords: Rural reconstruction, cooperative effort, community development.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore once said, his father was “a poet who was an indefatigable man of action” and “his greatest poem is the life he has lived”. Rural reconstruction work that Rabindranath considered as his ‘life’s work’ continued in three main phases : the first one during his work as a zaminder in his family estate in East Bengal, the second one during the ‘Swadeshi Movement’ in 1903-08 and the third one at Sriniketan during 1920s. His principle of ‘life in its completeness’ found a practical expression in his active works on rural reconstruction that are still relevant to the present challenges in the world.

Rabindranath was engaged in his Zamindari work in his family estates at Silaidaha and Patisar during 1890s and his field work in rural reconstruction began here where he gained first-hand experience about real conditions of the poor people of rural Bengal. As a recollection of this phase, he said in an address to the workers of Sriniketan in 1939, “gradually the sorrow and poverty of the villagers became clear to me, and I began to grow restless to do something about itfrom that time onward I continuously endeavoured to find out how villagers’ mind could be aroused, so that they themselves could accept responsibility for their own lives.”

The second phase of his endeavour on rural development began in the environment of his home. Jyotirindranath Tagore’s patriotic fervor, idealism, zeal and above all, his deepest love for the country found a great deal of Swadeshi ventures, organizing Sanjibani Sabha impelled and stimulated the Poet to participate in Swadeshi activities. Tagore anticipated on ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ based on self-help and self-sufficiency which he reiterated throughout his life “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 an essay called ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, published in 1904 and another essay following it, Tagore expressed his concrete ideas for a programme of rural reconstruction. His emphasis was on reorganization of rural life through collective efforts. The programme includes the revival of cottage industries to alleviate the poverty of the village folk, reduction of expenditure at socio-religious ceremonies, the creation of a group of volunteers who would take initiative to form a harmonious relationship between Hindus and Muslims, keen cooperation between rural workers and villagers, employment of a people’s representative as the leader of the society who would be selected by the people. “To eat alone was a greater shame for us than to use humble banana leaves for sharing our food with others. Shall we not get back that sense of shame? “

The third phase of Rabindranath’s activities on rural reconstruction started after he purchased a house and land at Surul in 1912. The underlying principle was “we must liberate these few villages in every respect so that all may receive education, a breeze of joy may blow once again, songs and music, recitation from epics and scriptures may fill them, as of yore. Mould just these few villages ...”. The main motive of the programme was “to try to feed the choked bed of village life with the stream of happiness”. He believed that proper training, education and encouragement can lift the fortunes of these people and self-initiation, self-help and social cooperation are the means to achieve his goals. In his speech at the Madras National Education

Development society in 1919 he gave a broad picture of his educational ideas: “Our centre of culture should not only be the centre of intellectual life of India but the centre of economic life also. It must cultivate land, breed cattle to feed itself and its students, it must produce all necessities, devising the best means, using the best materials, calling science to its aid. Its very existence should depend upon the success of its industrial ventures carried out on the cooperative principle, which will unite the teachers and the students in a living and active bond of necessity. This will also give us practical industrial training, whose motive force is not the greed of profit.”

Leonard Elmhirst in his famous book ‘Poet and the Ploughman’ said: “we decided to offer major and minor projects for each student to work on and to try and establish cooperation among the local farmers in buying, selling and for credit.” So, it is so evident that Tagore in all his endeavours of rural upliftment wanted ‘self-reliance’ in the true sense of the term. His constant efforts of mass upliftment from ignorance, superstitions, poverty, illiteracy, joylessness are still relevant in today’s scenario.

Tagore’s concept was self-reliance and self-help through community development projects, cooperative credit, spread of basic education, use of science and technology in agriculture, development of cottage industries, in general, establishment of a genuine relationship with the village folk and understanding their problems as part of their daily lives.

Experiment at Silaidaha and Patisar

“Once I lived in a boat on the Padma and devoted myself to literature, I often used to fancy that my only vocation was to delve with the pen deep in the mine of ideas, that I was not competent for any other work. But I failed to persuade anybody that the real field of home rule was in the village and that the cultivation of that field must start at once. And so for a while I set aside my pen and decided that I should myself undertake the work.” Silaidaha in Nadia district was chosen as the centre of his first experiment for rural work. With help of a group of enthusiasts, prominent among them Kalimohan Ghosh, Tagore attempted to deal with the rural problems in a more organized way. Workers and villagers jointly carried out such work as repairing roads and drains, clearing jungles, tanks. In Kusthea, a weaving school was established. New businesses like jute, brick kilns, sugar crushing mill were introduced and introduction of commercial crops like potato was attempted to give practical demonstration of manures. In 1919 his rural work was shifted to Kaligram Pargana of Pabna district. In patisar, he introduced facilities for medical treatment, public works – like digging of wells, repairing of roads, security for cultivation workers from indebtedness. Three centres were started at Patisar, Kamta and Ratowal, each with a hospital and dispensary. Money collected for welfare Society Fund was utilized for public services.

Kaligram provided the first example in Bengal where public works were carried out with the voluntary contribution of individual labour. Agriculture credit was regulated. Freed from the current debts, the cultivator again be in a position to borrow from the estate in necessity. This scheme gave relief to the indebted farmers in Kaligram villages and people were freed from their burdens of debt. In a letter written to one of the workers at Kaligram village, Tagore wrote: “Life in villages must be made more attractive, work and joy must be combined and an aesthetic sense should be developed. “ Tagore’s comprehensive programme of rural reconstruction included the whole gamut of village life. Even such humble village industries as the manufacture of straw-mats, earthen pots and wicker baskets were incorporated in this programme.

Sriniketan

Tagore first met Leonard Elmhirst in 1920 and discussed his dream project of starting a centre of rural reconstruction in Sriniketan. In 1922, a new chapter began in the history of Sriniketan. Under the strong initiative of Elmhirst, Tagore’s experiments on rural reconstruction that began at Silaidaha and continued at Kaligram, found its culmination here. In Sikha-Satra and Sikha-Charcha-Bhavana, the village boys belonging to all castes received education as well as instruction in music, agriculture, hygiene and sanitation and also in village craft. Experiments were undertaken for varieties of new crops that may be suitable for local conditions in the department of Agriculture. Scientific experiments were made in dairy and animal husbandry for improvement of financial conditions of village people. Revival of cottage industries and introduction of new ones was the main motto of the activities in Silpa-Bhavana. Thus income from agriculture could be supplemented with the help of rural industries. Village Welfare Department took initiative for public works like road repairing, tank cleaning and maintaining a circulation library. Brati-Balak or boy-scouts organization and Maternity and Child Welfare section were established in 1940. A number of Co-operative Health Societies provided medical treatment at a low cost for the villagers. A

significant portion of rural development work was carried out by the Village Welfare Department. A central co-operative bank at Sriniketan worked in close collaboration with the institute. Tagore stressed “the scale of our enterprise can never be a matter of pride to us, but let us hope its truth will be.” Ideas, if they have the vitality of truth in them, grow and spread in course of time, but in the initial stages they have to be cultivated. Cooperation between rural workers and villagers was the very core of the foundation in the organization of Sriniketan. The principle of indivisibility of life and combination of work with joy, games, music, excursions, socio-religious festivals – all these contributed to Tagore’s ideals for rural reconstruction programme. ‘Hala Karshan’, ‘Barshamangal’, ‘Vrikha-Ropan’, ‘Nabo-Barsho’ etc. were introduced in the villages.

Village problems were investigated and studied at the experimental farm and knowledge acquired in the classroom and farm was applied for the improvement of their living conditions. At the first stage seventy six villages were involved in conducting different activities of the institute. For administrative purposes the area of experiments was divided into 2 zones – 1) Intensive area and 2) Extensive area. Intensive area consisted of 26 villages under direct supervision of Sriniketan. The activities were broadly divided into agriculture, village-welfare, health and sanitation, education, soil-erosion, economic research, industry etc. The Health section received high priority with anti-malaria school. It included a dispensary, laboratory, family and child welfare clinic and also a leprosy section. Silpa-Bhavana (Industry Department) provided training in pottery, carpentry, tailoring, embroidery, lacquer and brick works. Dairy, fishery and poultry were all included in the agriculture department. The activities of the Education department spread into the areas of the adult and continuing education, basic education, teachers’ training, circulating library and night schools for the welfare of the villagers. A central co-operative Bank and several co-operative societies were organized in Sriniketan and surrounding villages.

Rural Reconstruction: New Challenges

After independence several institutes with Community Development Programme for rural India were established on the basis of the model of Sriniketan. Rural credit, literacy campaign, family planning and a number of nation-building initiatives are undertaken by both the central and state government agencies and a huge sum of money is generated for these programmes. But unfortunately, as noted by Sudhir Sen (1991), “.. problem in rural India is not lack of action, but wrong action, not lack of planning, but faulty planning, not lack of funds, but wasteful spending of funds.” It is this spirit and ideas that must be applied to the new realities of the present age. Tagore’s initiatives, ideals and activities of rural reconstruction programme was itself a significant historical and path-breaking movement as he wanted to rescue the villagers from ‘dire poverty and dreary existence’ and sought to open the eyes of the British Government and national leaders of the country. His principles and ideals of upliftment of village people and rural development aptly transcends both time and place.

Now question arises, how can the nation be benefitted from a huge investment for rural development? What is needed is an objective examination by some independent and competent experts on a continuous basis who have a great passion and respect for Tagore’s ideals. Significant development had taken place in Punjab, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka should be studied thoroughly. An all-India and third world orientation would be effective for realizing Tagore’s teachings and principles of progressive economics. Hardworking and talented post-graduate students should be encouraged to engage in these areas for their doctorate research. Visva-Bharati Economic Research should be an effective vehicle for progress in Sriniketan area, other parts of West Bengal as well as in India and other third world countries. Sriniketan’s Agricultural Extension Service including animal husbandry and dairy should be improved with new varieties suitable for low-fertility and low-rainfall region. Silpa-Bhavana or Cottage Industries Centre has great potentials to increase efficiency, improve quality, introduction of new tools, above all, revival of old crafts in a useful and sellable articles and earning a decent profit. Visva-Bharati could establish a modern school of Design at Sriniketan and branch in Kolkata to train students in a wide range of designs for India as a whole. These action programmes can be a better way to honour Tagore in realizing his ideals at Sriniketan.

Discussion

Tagore’s model of rural reconstruction was much debated and criticised during his lifetime and contemporary society was not very enthusiastic to accept it as the ‘unique venture’ for the village upliftment in rural India. But Tagore as a great visionary realised the logical, scientific and realistic way of the solutions of so many upheavals that one associated with the lives of the rural mass in our society. Today a proper leadership is needed to implement all the ideals of Tagore regarding rural upliftment through cooperative

effort, who can analyse and solve the problems of village life through holistic perspectives, considered the programme as human development as perceived by Tagore.

The positive effect of Tagore's rural reconstruction model at Sriniketan was seen vividly in post-independent India through various community development projects, block development scheme, cottage industry movement etc. As an example it may be recorded here that Pannalal Dasgupta (1908-1999), in association with Joyprakash Narayan founded Tagore Society for Rural Development inspired by Tagore's rural reconstruction work and it gradually spread to West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, the renowned agricultural scientist who fostered Green Revolution in the country, gave importance on Tagore's model of rural reconstruction. He suggested that the scientific applications of biotechnology with the traditional knowledge in villages could bring desired changes in the concept of farming as well as in the mode of production.

Major changes happened in the world after Tagore's demise in 1941. India is now a fast-growing economy and foreign trade has been expanded by adopting GATT and WTO treaties in 90's. Technological advancement especially in the fields of information and communication technology has brought India in the same platform with the western world. But millions of people are still below the poverty line. They are not the beneficiaries of the economic growth and technological advancement of the country. So, Tagore's thoughts for the social and economical upliftment of the rural and downtrodden people and his practical work for the reconstruction model at Sriniketan is still relevant in the present socio-economic scenario.

The Sriniketan experiment brought important changes in lives of rural people. Health condition and mortality rates were much improved with the successful implementation of health-care schemes. Agricultural productivity was higher with the rotation of crops and proper use of technology. 'The Times of India', September 5, 2016 reported that 50% of India's population will live in urban areas by 2030. So mechanized farming is an urgent necessity to sustain Indian agriculture and for the improvement of the living conditions of farmers. Farmers' income needs to be supplemented by dairy, fishery, floriculture, horticulture, herbal and aromatic crop cultivation etc. Sriniketan could and should be the ideal model in these areas. Small scale cottage industry and handicrafts items of Sriniketan, much acclaimed nationally and internationally contributed to the sustenance of the economy of the region. Survey reports suggested that people of Surul village mainly earn their livelihood through traditional Kantha stitch, Batik and embroidery on silk and cotton sarees, kurtas etc. A number of self-help groups with 9 to 11 women together earn in this profession through micro-finance in different villages in this area and they formed cooperatives for financial assistance. Products are very much in demand in Kolkata, Delhi, US and in textile outlets all over the world. Amar Kutir at Sriniketan also promotes leather goods, Batik, Dogra, terracotta etc. Now-a-days corporate offices, resorts, building use these articles for beautification. Tribals, Santhals, Adibashis of the villages adjoining Sriniketan mainly depended on agri-horticulture, growing and marketing special types of orchids and medicinal plant. Village hut, known as 'Sanibarar Hut' is held on every Saturday for promotion of tribal ornaments, ethnic accessories, fruits and seeds.

Conclusion

The ideas of Tagore on rural development is nicely expressed in his own words: "If we could free even one village from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established... Let a few villages be rebuilt in this way and I shall say they are my India. This is the way to discover the true India." "We have to reconstruct our national life with the village as the centre. To bring completeness of life to the villages has been a dream of mine of longstanding."

Government's economic policies may concentrate on large-scale employment generation, big industries etc; but they should think on a vision of Tagore's Sriniketan model and analyse his concept of sustainable development of villages which can generate their livelihood through their 'self-inherited ability' and cooperative efforts. Sriniketan, an ideal and dream project for the poet may not fulfill all long-cherished goals of self-help, self-sufficiency, cooperation and life with dignity for the village people. Activities of various departments may not be organized in such a way that they should provide maximum benefit to the rural population. There is a scarcity of properly trained personnel, adequate funds etc. as well as the changed attitude of people towards the institute, yet it has to be accepted that Sriniketan is 'pioneering venture' in rural reconstruction and community development projects.

Tagore would have been saddened to see that even today basic education and health-care have not reached the poor people of our country adequately. Poverty, illiteracy, social backwardness, sectarianism, religious tensions would not have been acceptable to him in this democracy. He pioneered in his thoughts and deeds to bring desirable changes in this 'unjust' and unequal world, especially in rural India. In this troubled

world, his legacy of values of ‘universality’ and ‘diversity’ is much needed concept that we can imbibe in our thoughts and actions.

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