

TRACING THE ORIGINS OF NATIONAL SERVICE SCHEME IN TAGORE'S IDEA OF RURAL RECONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT:

Rabindranath Tagore's idea of rural development was one of the major instruments of the social and economic upliftment of the disadvantaged communities, likely peasants and labourers living in the village area. Despite being the son of a landlord, Tagore dedicated himself to the welfare of the rural poor. He was farsighted to establishing self-reliant villages and revitalising the rural economy. Tagore actively participated in addressing the grievances and poverty of the poor people. He diligently tried to eradicate illiteracy and superstitions among the peasants, labourers and the insolvents. Tagore viewed rural development as the sole path to national progress. He realised that the key to India's development lay in its villages. Without the holistic welfare of villages, the prosperity of India was unachievable. Therefore, true independence for society is equivalent to India's independence. Nearly half a century after Rabindranath's efforts, the National Service Scheme (NSS) was introduced in 1969 by the Government of India. The objectives of this scheme were aligned with Rabindranath's rural development ideas. The scheme focused on adopting villages and undertaking community development works. This article will try to find out Tagore's village development ideas and how it is considered a model for the NSS.

Keywords: Development, village, welfare, society, nation, community, peasants.

At the outset of the twentieth century, when Rabindranath Tagore took charge of the Jamindari in the vast area of East Bengal, he saw the plight of the peasants as well as the poor people of Bengal. He came close to these fragmented people and felt how peasants and the poorer were suffering from the unscientific knowledge in agriculture, ignorance in society and the hand of natural calamity. To resolve these problems and create a model village by uplifting the condition of villagers, Tagore selected Patisar, Kaligram, Shahjampur, Santiniketan, and Sriniketan to transform his vision of rural development into reality. In these areas, he implemented initiatives to modernise agriculture, boost production, and introduce cooperative farming practices, market agricultural and handicraft products. He established farms, promoted agro-based industries, expanded cottage industries, set up schools, built health centres, libraries, playgrounds, and organised fairs. He also worked on disaster management, constructing roads, establishing cooperative banks, fighting diseases like malaria and cholera, and setting up grain reserves to prevent famine. His efforts inspired community participation and personally contributed to these welfare activities. Tagore's rural development vision was combined with cooperative efforts and advanced technology. On 10th May 1893, Tagore wrote a letter from Silaiadah stating that he felt immense compassion when he saw the broken tenants. They seemed as helpless as the children of the creator. Unless he personally provides something for them, they have no way forward. When the breast of the earth dries up, they only know how to cry. A little relief from hunger makes them forget again.ⁱ

Tagore believed that the development of one village could awaken the entire nation. For him, rural development encompassed the comprehensive improvement of villages. He identified caste and class discrimination as the primary obstacles to progress. In his essay 'Palli Prakriti', he remarked that he cannot take responsibility for all of India alone. He will only strive to transform one or two villages.

He told us that we must win their trust and gain the strength to work together. This is not easy; it requires immense perseverance. If I can free even two or three villages from the shackles of ignorance, incapacity and illiteracy, then it will create a small model for all of India.ⁱⁱ

Rabindranath was a man of urban sensibilities. In the early stages of his life, his exposure to rural villages was minimal. However, after arriving in East Bengal in 1890 to manage his family estate, he was introduced to rural life. He became familiar with the customs and various relevant issues of rural life. The three key areas that Rabindranath emphasised were: building organisations at the village level, bridging the gap between the educated community and rural society, and extending rural development efforts to the general public. This was essential because the majority of the rural population was not only poor, but also engaged in agricultural work. All of them were subject to exploitation. Among the various activities Rabindranath participated in expanding education, establishing health centers in villages, digging wells, constructing roads, clearing jungles, renovating ponds and ditches, protecting farmers from indebtedness, spreading ethical education, promoting unity among people, solving unemployment through agriculture and animal husbandry, collecting information about rural inhabitants, solving rural issues through local mediator/arbitrator and organizing day classes for children and night classes for the elderly.ⁱⁱⁱ In this context, the 'Hitaishi Sabha' was established in Patisar. Rabindranath promoted the universal and efficient implementation of cooperative policies. With the help of cooperative banks, he worked on alleviating the farmers' debt burden. The main feature of his rural development and educational ideas was connecting people on a deeper, emotional level. Through rural education, his primary aim was to establish the principle of cooperation.^{iv}

Rabindranath believed that the true essence of the motherland lay in its villages. It was in the rural areas that he directly experienced the core values of the Indian ideal. Awakening the humanistic values of rural people was the essence of his rural education. In his presidential address at the 1908 Provincial INC Conference at Pabna, he said, Provide education in villages, introduce new efforts regarding agriculture, industries, and village products, encourage cleanliness, health, and beauty in the village dwellings, and guide the villagers to collectively perform all village duties in an organised manner. In his essay 'Swadeshi Samaj', he stated that, for self-preservation, society must be awakened and take authority. Once society gains this authority, it will resolve all its issues.^v

Rabindranath Tagore first thought about helping neglected villages when he lived on his family's agricultural estates in East Bengal in the 1890s. As the manager of these estates, he saw rural life closely and realised how much suffering the villagers faced. This experience encouraged him to take practical steps to help them. In 1922, he started Sriniketan, a centre for rural development, as part of Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan. His main aim was to make poor villagers self-reliant and economically strong. The idea was new for that time. He wanted to improve farming through scientific methods and experiments, where both experts and farmers worked together. To support this plan, he sent his eldest son, Rathindranath Tagore, to the United States to study agriculture. He also invited a famous British agriculturist, Leonard Knight Elmhirst, to stay and work at Sriniketan for a year. Tagore also tried to revive traditional village arts and crafts so people could earn and create at the same time. Tagore worked independently and did not mix his rural reconstruction work with the Nationalist Movement.^{vi} He believed that villages were the heart of Indian society and culture. He wanted to rebuild rural India through education, economic progress, and community effort.^{vii}

Leonard Knight Elmhirst strongly believed that rural reconstruction was necessary for community development. He thought that both agricultural knowledge and social welfare were needed to improve village life. In 1922, Tagore and Elmhirst gave a talk at Calcutta University called "The Robbery of

Soil.” Elmhirst said that cities take everything from the soil and give back almost nothing. They explained that whatever we take from society or land, we must return something equal. At the same time, educated people (bhadralok) stopped visiting villages. They complained that villages did not have enough good food or intellectual activities. They ignored the fact that villages became worse because they abandoned them. Very few people tried to understand the real problems of the villages, and even if they did, they were unwilling to clearly express their findings.^{viii} In 1915, Tagore worked with the Bengal Social Service League. He gave speeches on rural development. He prepared a programme that included teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic to illiterate people. He suggested organising small classes and printing pamphlets to improve public health. He wanted villagers to learn first aid and nursing. Tagore also planned community efforts to fight diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and dysentery. He wanted to reduce infant deaths, provide clean drinking water, set up cooperative credit societies, and show villagers how useful these societies could be. He also suggested organising public help during floods, famines, and epidemics.^{ix}

THE PROCESS OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT:

Rabindranath Tagore mentioned that in our country, there was a time when young urban students set out to help the villages. The villagers mocked them, saying, "Here come the four-anna gentlemen! How can they help us? They don't know our language, nor are they familiar with our hearts. From that time, he has felt that work must be done in the villages.^x Rabindranath felt the need for science-based production in agricultural India to improve the lives of the poor villagers.^{xi} In 1906, he sent his son and his friend's son, Santosh Majumdar, to study agricultural science and rural studies at the University of Illinois, USA. After the marriage of his youngest daughter, Mira, in 1907, his son-in-law, Nagendranath Ganguly, was also sent abroad to study agricultural science and returned after obtaining higher degrees. In 1909, after Rathindranath and others returned from abroad, they started scientific farming, fertilisation, seed distribution, irrigation, and other systems under the guidance of the poet. In Patishar, they encouraged sixty to seventy thousand people from 125 villages to join meetings. These meetings not only managed the village schools and hospitals but also took charge of road repairs, clearing forests, and handling minor disputes.^{xii}

In his essay 'Palli Prakriti', Rabindranath Tagore states, "My proposal is this: wherever in Bengal, we take one village and make it completely self-governing. The roads and buildings in the village, its school, its literature and recreation, its healthcare and treatment, its conflict resolution, and all other functions should be managed by the villagers through well-organised rules. To carry out this task, a night school should be established to educate those who will work. This school should be run voluntarily by students and teachers, and should focus on road repairs, building maintenance, drainage, pond management, land surveys, emergency treatment, and education. Those who are talented in these fields must establish a connection with the people of the village. With the expectation that every village should become self-sufficient, Rabindranath planned villages in places like Shilaidah, Patishar, Kaligram, and Sriniketan. He said that all the villages of the country must be developed to fulfil their various needs. A council will be established with several villages, and the leaders of this council will organise and arrange for all the work and the removal of shortages in the villages. The council will assist and encourage the establishment of schools, industries, educational institutions, religious places, cooperative product warehouses, and banks.^{xiii}

In 1901, Rabindranath established the Brahmacharyashram in Shantiniketan. Furthermore, 21 years later, in 1922, he established an agricultural and rural development centre at Sarul village, which was two miles away from Shantiniketan. Later, it came to be known as Sriniketan. Sriniketan developed into a 'Shiksha Chatra' (school of education). The goal of this school was rural reconstruction. The

primary aim was to rejuvenate the villages, which were gradually deteriorating and losing their vitality. In response to Rabindranath's rural reconstruction work, Leonard Elmhirst joined the effort. He named the institution the "Institution of Rural Reconstruction." At this institution, agricultural research was conducted along with the development of various handicrafts, such as leatherwork, weaving, dyeing, pottery, and printing. Samples of different crafts were collected from various districts of India, and work was started to train the villagers. They were taught skills like weaving, dyeing clothes, woodwork, leatherwork, bookbinding, house cleaning, washing clothes, cooking, and outdoor skills.^{xiv} When Leonard Elmhirst met the poet, Rabindranath, with the help of some students and teachers from Shantiniketan, he established an organisation called the "Village Organisation Centre. The purpose of this organisation was to improve agricultural practices, prevent diseases like malaria, establish cooperative religious places, set up medical facilities, and increase health awareness among the general villagers."^{xv}

Rabindranath Tagore observed that the middle-class, ordinary people of India were gradually becoming dependent on the government. They had deviated from their traditions and were losing their self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-respect, turning into a nation of dependence. He believed that the only way to elevate the rural, traditional people to a position of dignity was through proper education. Concerning the health awareness of the village, the poet remarked that our consciousness is not reaching a national level; our efforts are only succeeding in some places while failing in others. A division exists between the educated society and the general public, and as a result, national unity is not being formed. This unity cannot be created through advice or discussion alone. Only when the educated society extends its efforts into the broader community can our collective spirit spread everywhere without hindrance. We must put aside all debates and differences and work together to save the country from destruction and division.^{xvi}

In Kaligram, Rabindranath's institution later received recognition from Calcutta University. In Patishar, the high school was filled with students. Disputes and lawsuits were being resolved by the leaders of the rural arbitration councils. The blacksmiths, potters, and weavers were working comfortably at their craft. He emphasised that India's rural areas needed schools where economics, agricultural science, health education, and practical science would form the core of daily life. These schools would cultivate ideal models, teach animal husbandry, promote weaving, and ensure financial independence through cooperative efforts. Rabindranath founded Visva-Bharati to establish such an ideal educational institution. He believed that we must create our own society so that one day our children can proudly say, all of this, everything we have of our own making. We have made our fields fertile, purified our water bodies, cleansed the air, expanded education, and made our hearts fearless. They should be able to say, this beautiful land, this fertile, prosperous motherland, rooted in knowledge, religion, and work, infused with courage and vitality this national society is our achievement. Looking around, they would see that everything is filled with our thoughts, efforts, and lives, echoing with joy and song, and shaking with the tireless steps of those travelling new hopeful paths.^{xvii}

Rabindranath appealed to the people, saying, "You must take charge of each village wherever you can, go there, and take shelter. Organise the villages, provide education and introduce new attempts regarding agricultural industries and village management materials. Inspire the villagers to create homes that are clean, healthy, and beautiful. Encourage them to come together and take responsibility for the village's tasks. Do not expect fame from this work; you may even face obstacles and disbelief from the villagers instead of gratitude. There should be no excitement, no conflicts, and no declarations. Only patience and love are required, quietly working in solitude, with the singular

resolve to share the suffering of the most unfortunate people in the country and dedicate your entire life to alleviating their fundamental misery.^{xviii}

RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S RURAL DEVELOPMENT IDEAS AND NATIONAL SERVICE SCHEME:

The aims and objectives of national service are deeply intertwined with Rabindranath Tagore's concept of rural development. As a landlord and a highly educated individual, Rabindranath Tagore felt the joys and sorrows of the common people in the villages. He established a spiritual connection with them and worked towards their social and economic upliftment. He was the first to recognise that for the progress of India, the villages must be made self-sufficient, and a spiritual bond must be established between the educated class and the rural population. Rabindranath took personal responsibility for the economic development of the rural poor, introducing modern agricultural practices, irrigation, and the use of high-quality fertilisers, seeds, and technology. He formed agricultural cooperatives to protect farmers from moneylenders and usurers.^{xix}

To promote handicrafts and make villages self-sufficient, he established Sriniketan and started health awareness programs in the villages. He considered each village a small unit and created a working plan for its development, which he then implemented. In his effort to spread education in a natural environment, he established Shantiniketan, where he also set up a night school for adult education. In this environment, students and teachers could form a spiritual connection with each other, working together in the ashram to perform various tasks like road construction, cooking, cleanliness, and providing measures against diseases like malaria and others. Through his efforts, Rabindranath emphasised the importance of rural development and the social, economic, and health awareness of village people.^{xx} He repeatedly stressed that if we cannot align our country's conditions with the current nature of the world, we will face extinction. He observed that modern nature is characterised by collaboration, organisation, and interdependence. Therefore, the distinctiveness and signs of decay in the villages must be addressed through effective management.^{xxi}

Nearly half a century after Rabindranath's efforts, the NSS was introduced. The objectives of this project were aligned with Rabindranath's rural development ideas. The project focused on adopting villages or rural areas and undertaking the repair of roads, ponds, drains, tubewells, and water bodies. It aimed to increase education, health, environmental awareness, and establish mutual relationships, along with technological development and moral improvement, transforming the villages into national assets. The Indian government entrusted teachers and students with the responsibility of this work, ensuring that knowledge gained from research and technology, along with the labour of the youth, would contribute to national productivity and benefit marginalised communities.^{xxii} Thus, Rabindranath's view on social development and the goals of community upliftment align perfectly with the objectives of the National Service Scheme. It can be said that Rabindranath Tagore's ideas, objectives, and methods of social development were later integrated into the National Service Scheme. The motto of NSS 'Not Me But You' and service to the communities' distorted people for reconstructing villages as well as India has been taken from Rabindranath Tagore. Therefore Rabindranath Tagore is obviously considered the originator of National Service Scheme in India.

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ⁱⁱ Tagore, Rabindranath. Palli Prakriti, Bishwabharati Granthanalay, Kolkata, Compiled & edited by Pulin Bihari Sen, 1962, pp.104.

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- ^{xvii} Ibid,pp.14.
- ^{xviii} Ibid,pp.11.
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^{xxii} National Service Scheme Manual, Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, Govt. of India, New Delhi, Revised, 2006, pp.13-14.