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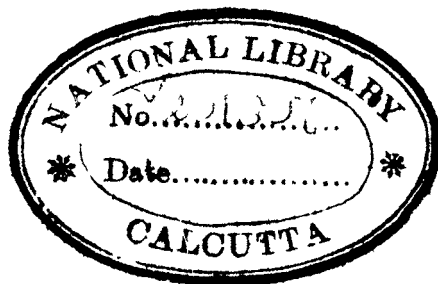
PAMPHLET No. 1



MY SCHOOL

BY

RABINDRANATH TAGORE



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*Price one anna.*

## My School

I STARTED a school in Bengal when I was nearing forty. And I know what it was to which this school owes its origin. It was not any new theory of education, but the memory of my school-days.

Our childhood should be given its full measure of life's draught, for which it has an endless thirst. The young mind should be saturated with the idea that it has been born in a human world which is in harmony with the world around it. And this is what our regular type of school ignores with an air of superior wisdom, severe and disdainful. It forcibly snatches away children from a world full of the mystery of God's own handiwork, full of the suggestiveness of personality. It is a mere method of discipline which refuses to take into account the individual. It is a manufactory specially designed for grinding out uniform results. It follows an imaginary straight line of the average in digging its channel of education. But life's line is not the straight line, for it is fond of playing the see-saw with the line of the average, bringing upon its head the rebuke of the school. For according to the school life is perfect when it allows itself to be treated as dead, to be cut into symmetrical conveniences. And this was the cause of my suffering when I was sent to school. For all of a sudden I found my world vanishing from around me, giving place to wooden benches and straight walls staring at me with the blank stare of the blind. I was not a creation of the schoolmaster,—the Government Board of Education was not consulted when I took birth in the world. But was that any reason why they should wreak their vengeance upon me for this oversight of my creator ?

Though I did not have to serve the full penal term which men of my position have to undergo to find their entrance into cultured society, I am glad that I did not altogether escape from its molestation,

For it has given me knowledge of the wrong from which the children of men suffer.

The cause of it is this, that man's intention is going against God's intention as to how children should grow into knowledge.

We have come to this world to accept it, not merely to know it. We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fulness by sympathy. The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence. But we find that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but it is severely repressed. From our very childhood habits are formed and knowledge is imparted in such a manner that our life is weaned away from nature and our mind and the world are set in opposition from the beginning of our days. Thus the greatest of educations for which we came prepared is neglected, and we are made to lose our world to find a bagful of information instead. We rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him grammar. His hunger is for the Epic, but he is supplied with chronicles of facts and dates. He was born in the human world, but is banished into the world of living gramophones, to expiate for the original sin of being born in ignorance. Child-nature protests against such calamity with all its power of suffering, subdued at last into silence by punishment.

We all know children are lovers of the dust; their whole body and mind thirst for sunlight and air as flowers do. They are never in a mood to refuse the constant invitations to establish direct communication which come to their senses from the universe.

I well remember the surprise and annoyance of an experienced headmaster, reputed to be a successful disciplinarian, when he saw one of the boys of my school climbing a tree and choosing a fork of the branches for settling down to his studies. I had to say to him in explanation that "childhood is the only period of life when a civilized man can exercise his choice between the branches of a tree and his drawing-room chair, and should I deprive this boy of that privilege because I, as a grown-up man, am barred from it?" What is surprising is to notice the same headmaster's approbation of the boys' studying botany. He believes in an impersonal knowledge of the tree because that is science, but not in a personal experience of it. This growth of

experience leads to forming instinct, which is the result of nature's own method of instruction. The boys of my school have acquired instinctive knowledge of the physiognomy of the tree. By the least touch they know where they can find a foothold upon an apparently inhospitable trunk ; they know how far they can take liberty with the branches, how to distribute their bodies' weight so as to make themselves least burdensome to branchlets. My boys are able to make the best possible use of the tree in the matter of gathering fruits, taking rest and hiding from undesirable pursuers. I myself was brought up in a cultured home in a town, and as far as my personal behaviour goes I have been obliged to act all through my life as if I were born in a world where there are no trees. Therefore I consider it as a part of education for my boys to let them fully realize that they are in a scheme of existence where trees are a substantial fact, not merely as generating chlorophyll and taking carbon from the air, but as living trees.

There are men who think that by the simplicity of living, introduced in my school, I preach the idealization of poverty which prevailed in the mediæval age. Poverty brings us into complete touch with life and the world, for living richly is living mostly by proxy, and thus living in a world of lesser reality. This may be good for one's pleasure and pride, but not for one's education. Wealth is a golden cage in which the children of the rich are bred into artificial deadening of their powers. Therefore in my school, much to the disgust of the people of expensive habits, I had to provide for this great teacher,—this bareness of furniture and materials,—not because it is poverty, but because it leads to personal experience of the world.

The object of education is to give man the unity of truth. Formerly when life was simple all the different elements of man were in complete harmony. But when there came the separation of the intellect from the spiritual and the physical, the school education put entire emphasis on the intellect and the physical side of man. We devote our sole attention to giving children information, not knowing that by this emphasis we are accentuating a break between the intellectual, physical and the spiritual life.

I believe in a spiritual world—not as anything separate from this world—but as its innermost truth. With the breath we draw we must always feel this truth, that we are living in God. **Born in this great**

world, full of the mystery of the infinite, we cannot accept our existence as a momentary outburst of chance, drifting on the current of matter towards an eternal nowhere. We cannot look upon our lives as dreams of a dreamer who has no awakening in all time. We have a personality to which matter and force are unmeaning unless related to something infinitely personal, whose nature we have discovered, in some measure, in human love, in the greatness of the good, in the martyrdom of heroic souls, in the ineffable beauty of nature, which can never be a mere physical fact nor anything but an expression of personality.

Experience of this spiritual world, whose reality we miss by our incessant habit of ignoring it from childhood, has to be gained by children by fully living in it and not through the medium of theological instruction. But how this is to be done is a problem difficult of solution in the present age. For nowadays men have managed so fully to occupy their time that they do not find leisure to know that their activities have only movement but very little truth, that their soul has not found its world.

In India we still cherish in our memory the tradition of the forest colonies of great teachers. These places were neither schools nor monasteries, in the modern sense of the word. They consisted of homes where with their families lived men whose object was to see the world in God and to realize their own life in him. Though they lived outside society, yet they were to society what the sun is to the planets, the centre from which it received its life and light. And here boys grew up in an intimate vision of eternal life before they were thought fit to enter the state of the householder.

Thus in the ancient India the school was there where was the life itself. There the students were brought up, not in the academic atmosphere of scholarship and learning, or in the maimed life of monastic seclusion, but in the atmosphere of living aspiration. They took the cattle to pasture, collected firewood, gathered fruit, cultivated kindness to all creatures, and grew in their spirit with their own teachers' spiritual growth. This was possible because the primary object of these places was not teaching but giving shelter to those who lived their life in God.

This ideal of education through sharing a life of high aspiration with one's master took possession of my mind. The narrowness of our

caged-up future and the sordidness of our maimed opportunities urged me all the more towards its realization. Those who in other countries are favoured with unlimited expectations of worldly prospects can fix their purposes of education on those objects. The range of their life is varied and wide enough to give them the freedom necessary for development of their powers. But for us to maintain the self-respect which we owe to ourselves and to our creator, we must make the purpose of our education nothing short of the highest purpose of man, the fullest growth and freedom of soul. It is pitiful to have to scramble for small pittance of fortune. Only let us have access to the life that goes beyond death and rises above all circumstances, let us find our God, let us live for that ultimate truth which emancipates us from the bondage of the dust and gives us the wealth, not of things but of inner light, not of power but of love. Such emancipation of soul we have witnessed in our country among men devoid of book-learning and living in absolute poverty. In India we have the inheritance of this treasure of spiritual wisdom. Let the object of our education be to open it out before us and to give us the power to make the true use of it in our life, and offer it to the rest of the world when the time comes, as our contribution to its eternal welfare.

Fortunately for me I had a place ready to my hand where I could begin my work. My father, in one of his numerous travels, had selected this lonely spot as the one suitable for his life of communion with God. This place, with a permanent endowment, he dedicated to the use of those who seek peace and seclusion for their meditation and prayer. I had about ten boys with me when I came here and started my new life with no previous experience whatever.

All round our *ashram* is a vast open country, bare up to the line of the horizon except for sparsely-growing stunted date palms and prickly shrubs struggling with ant-hills. Below the level of the field there extend numberless mounds and tiny hillocks of red gravel and pebbles of all shapes and colours, intersected by narrow channels of rain-water. Not far away towards the south near the village can be seen through the intervals of a row of palm trees the gleaming surface of steel-blue water, collected in a hollow of the ground. A road used by the village people for their marketing in the town goes meandering through the lonely fields, with its red dust staring in the sun. Travellers coming up this road can see from a distance on the summit of the undulating ground the

spire of a temple and the top of a building, indicating the Shanti-Niketan *ashram*, among its *amalaki* groves and its avenue of stately *sal* trees.

And here the school has been growing up for over fifteen years, passing through many changes and often grave crisis. Having the evil reputation of a poet, I could with great difficulty win the trust of my countrymen and avoid the suspicion of the bureaucracy. That at last I have been able to accomplish it in some measure is owing to my never expecting it, going on in my own way without waiting for outside sympathy, help or advice. My resources were extremely small, with the burden of a heavy debt upon them. But this poverty itself gave me the full strength of freedom, making me rely upon truth rather than upon materials.

Because the growth of this school was the growth of my life and not that of a mere carrying out of my doctrines, its ideals changed with its maturity like a ripening fruit that not only grows in its bulk and deepens in its colour, but undergoes change in the very quality of its inner pulp. I started with the idea that I had a benevolent object to perform. I worked hard, but the only satisfaction I had came from keeping count of the amount of sacrifice in money, energy and time, admiring my own untiring goodness. But the result achieved was of small worth. I went on building system after system and then pulling them down. It merely occupied my time, but at the heart my work remained vacant. I well remember when an old disciple of my father came and said to me, "What I see about me is like a wedding hall where nothing is wanting in preparation, only the bridegroom is absent." The mistake I made was in thinking that my own purpose was that bridegroom. But gradually my heart found its centre. It was not in the work, not in my wish, but in truth. I sat alone on the upper terrace of the Shanti-Niketan house and gazed upon the tree tops of the *sal* avenue before me. I withdrew my heart from my own schemes and calculations, from my daily struggles, and held it up in silence before the peace and presence that permeated the sky; and gradually my heart was filled. I began to see the world around me through the eyes of my soul. The trees seemed to me like silent hymns rising from the mute heart of the earth, and the shouts and laughter of the boys mingling in the evening sky came before me like trees of living sounds rising up from the depth of human



life. I found my message in the sunlight that touched my inner mind and felt a fulness in the sky that spoke to me in the word of our ancient rishi,—“Ko hyevanyat, Kah pranyat yadesha akasha anando no syat”—“Who could ever move and strive and live in this world if the sky were not filled with love ?” Thus when I turned back from the struggle to achieve results, from the ambition of doing benefit to others, and came to my own innermost need ; when I felt that living one’s own life in truth is living the life of all the world, then the unquiet atmosphere of the outward struggle cleared up and the power of spontaneous creation found its way through the centre of all things. Even now whatever is superficial and futile in the working of our institution is owing to distrust of the spirit, lurking in our mind, to the ineradicable consciousness of our self-importance, to the habit of looking for the cause of our failures outside us, and the endeavour to repair all looseness in our work by tightening the screws of organization. From my experience I know that where the eagerness to teach others is too strong, especially in the matter of spiritual life, the result becomes meagre and mixed with untruth. All the hypocrisy and self-delusion in our religious convictions and practices are the outcome of the goadings of over-zealous activities of mentorship. In our spiritual attainment gaining and giving are the same thing ; as in a lamp, to light itself is the same as to impart light to others. When a man makes it his profession to preach God to others, then he will raise the dust more than give direction to truth. Teaching of religion can never be imparted in the form of lessons, it is there where there is religion in living. Therefore the ideal of the forest colony of the seekers of God as the true school of spiritual life holds good even in this age. Religion is not a fractional thing that can be doled out in fixed weekly or daily measures as one among various subjects in the school syllabus. It is the truth of our complete being, the consciousness of our personal relationship with the infinite. It is the true centre of gravity of our life. This we can attain during our childhood by daily living in a place where the truth of the spiritual world is not obscured by a crowd of necessities assuming artificial importance ; where life is simple, surrounded by fulness of leisure, by ample space and pure air and profound peace of nature ; and where men live with a perfect faith in the eternal life before them.

I believe, as I suggested before, that children have their sub-

conscious mind more active than their conscious intelligence. A vast quantity of the most important of our lessons has been taught to us through this. Experiences of countless generations have been instilled into our nature by its agency, not only without causing us any fatigue, but giving us joy. This subconscious faculty of knowledge is completely one with our life. It is not like a lantern that can be lighted and trimmed from outside, but it is like the light that the glow worm possesses by the exercise of its life process.

Being convinced of this, I have set all my resources to create an atmosphere of ideas in the *ashram*. Songs are composed, not specially made to order for juvenile minds. They are songs that a poet writes for his own pleasure. In fact, most of my "Gitanjali" songs were written here. These, when fresh in their first bloom, are sung to the boys, and they come in crowds to learn them. They sing them in their leisure hours, sitting in groups, under the open sky on moonlight nights, in the shadows of the impending rain in July. All my latter day plays have been written here, and the boys have taken part in their performance. Lyrical dramas have been written for their season-festivals. They have ready access to the room where I read to the teachers any new things that I write in prose or in verse, whatever the subject may be. And this they utilize without the least pressure put upon them, feeling aggrieved when not invited.

Those who have witnessed these boys playing their part in dramatic performances have been struck with their wonderful power as actors. It is because they are never directly trained in the histrionic art. They instinctively enter into the spirit of the plays in which they take part, though these plays are no mere school-boy dramas. They require subtle understanding and sympathy. With all the anxiety and hypercritical sensitiveness of an author about the performance of his own play I have never been disappointed in my boys, and I have rarely allowed teachers to interfere with the boys' own representation of the characters. Very often they themselves write plays or improvise them and we are invited to their performance. They hold meetings of their literary clubs and they have at least three illustrated magazines conducted by three sections of the school, the most interesting of them being that of the infant section. A number of our boys have shown [ remarkable powers in drawing and painting, developed not through the

orthodox method of copying models, but by following their own bent and by the help of occasional visits from some artists to inspire the boys with their own work.

When I first started my school my boys had no evident love for music. The consequence is that at the beginning I did not employ a music teacher and did not force the boys to take music lessons. I merely created opportunities when those of us who had the gift could exercise their musical culture. It had the effect of unconsciously training the ears of the boys. And when gradually most of them showed a strong inclination and love for music I saw that they would be willing to subject themselves to formal teaching, and it was then that I secured a music teacher.

In our school the boys rise very early in the morning, sometimes before it is light. They attend to the drawing of water for their bath. They make up their beds. They do all those things that tend to cultivate the spirit of self help.

I believe in the hour of meditation, and I set aside fifteen minutes in the morning and fifteen minutes in the evening for that purpose. I insist on this period of meditation, not, however, expecting the boys to be hypocrites and to make believe they are meditating. But I do insist that they remain quiet, that they exert the power of self-control, even though instead of contemplating on God, they may be watching the squirrels running up the trees.

Any description of such a school is necessarily inadequate. For the most important element of it is the atmosphere, and the fact that it is not a school which is imposed upon the boys by autocratic authorities. I always try to impress upon their minds that it is their own world, upon which their life ought fully and freely to react. In the school administration they have their place, and in the matter of punishment we mostly rely upon their own court of justice.

In conclusion I warn my readers not to get any false or exaggerated picture of this *ashram*. When ideas are stated in a paper, they appear too simple and complete. But in reality their manifestation through the materials that are living and varied and ever changing is not so clear and perfect. We have obstacles in human nature and in outer circumstances. Some of us have a feeble faith in boys' minds as living organisms, and some have the natural propensity of doing good by force. On the other

hand, the boys have their different degrees of receptivity and there are a good number of inevitable failures. Delinquencies make their appearance unexpectedly, making us suspicious as to the efficacy of our own ideals. We pass through dark periods of doubt and reaction. But these conflicts and waverings belong to the true aspects of reality. Living ideals can never be set into a clockwork arrangement, giving accurate account of its every second. And those who have firm faith in their idea have to test its truth in discords and failures that are sure to come to tempt them from their path. I for my part believe in the principle of life, in the soul of man, more than in methods. I believe that the object of education is the freedom of mind which can only be achieved through the path of freedom—though freedom has its risk and responsibility as life itself has. I know it for certain, though most people seem to have forgotten it, that children are living beings—more living than grown-up people, who have built their shells of habit around them. Therefore it is absolutely necessary for their mental health and development that they should not have mere schools for their lessons, but a world whose guiding spirit is personal love. It must be an *ashram* where men have gathered for the highest end of life, in the peace of nature ; where life is not merely meditative, but fully awake in its activities, where boys' minds are not being perpetually drilled into believing that the ideal of the self idolatry of the nation is the truest ideal for them to accept ; where they are bidden to realize man's world as God's Kingdom to whose citizenship they have to aspire ; where the sunrise and sunset and the silent glory of stars are not daily ignored ; where natures festivities of flowers and fruit have their joyous recognition from man ; and where the young and the old the teacher and the student, sit at the same table to partake of their daily food and the food of their eternal life.

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