

Rabindranath Tagore: The Bard of Bengal and His Roots in the Indian Knowledge System

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore, known and celebrated as the “Bard of Bengal,” is one of the most significant literary and philosophical influences in the modern Indian context. His work is deeply embedded in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), and Tagore’s own thoughts and creative expressions are a beautiful blend of ancient Indian wisdom and modern humanism. This paper will examine how the basic tenets of the IKS, rooted in the Upanishads, the Vedas, and the overall spiritual and literary traditions of India, influenced Tagore’s worldview, educational philosophy, and literary genius.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System (IKS), Rabindranath Tagore

I. INTRODUCTION

A legendary writer, philosopher, educator, musician, painter, and cultural reformer, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) influenced the intellectual and spiritual climate of India and the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. With his collection of poetry, Gitanjali, Tagore became the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. He was a polymath of astounding talent. Respected as the Bard of Bengal, Gurudev, and Kabiguru, Tagore’s contributions go beyond literary genres and touch on spirituality, nationalism, education, and the arts.

Tagore frequently served as a link between the Indian and Western intellectual traditions, drawing inspiration from both in his creative genius. His writings demonstrate a profound respect for Indian philosophical history, particularly the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), which refers to the native scholarly, spiritual, musical, and sociocultural traditions that have thrived in the subcontinent for thousands of years. His work’s great universality and enduring significance stemmed from this amalgamation of the ancient with the modern, the East with the West.

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) occupies a vital place in higher education because it presents a holistic and interdisciplinary model of learning shaped by centuries of intellectual, philosophical, scientific, and cultural evolution. Rather than treating disciplines as isolated domains, IKS views knowledge as an interconnected whole. The inclusion of IKS in higher education not only safeguards India’s civilizational heritage but also strengthens critical thinking, creativity, innovation, and sustainable approaches to life.

Ancient Indian scholarship made remarkable contributions in diverse fields such as **Ayurveda**, mathematics, astronomy, linguistics, statecraft, and architecture. Texts like the Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita systematized medical science; Aryabhata’s Aryabhatiya advanced astronomy and mathematics; and Panini’s grammatical treatise laid the scientific foundation of linguistics. These works demonstrate that ancient Indian literature was not limited to spirituality but extended deeply into scientific and technical domains, many of which remain relevant in contemporary research.

A central feature of IKS is its **holistic worldview**, which integrates ethics, sustainability, and spirituality with empirical inquiry and practical knowledge. The foundational texts—such as the Rigveda, Upanishads, and various Puranic and Smriti traditions—offer profound reflections on cosmology, consciousness, and human purpose. These texts formed the earliest layer of Indian literature, preserved initially through a meticulous oral tradition in poetic and mnemonic forms to ensure accuracy across generations.



The growth of literature within IKS reflects a dynamic and continuous intellectual expansion. Beginning with the Vedic corpus, Indian literary production evolved into the great epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which combined narrative art with ethical philosophy, political thought, and social values. Over time, literature diversified into philosophical treatises (Darshanas), logical works of Nyaya, classical poetry and drama, scientific manuals, commentaries, and regional devotional literature. This steady expansion of literary forms illustrates how knowledge in India was constantly interpreted, debated, and rearticulated to meet changing social and intellectual needs.

IKS also places strong emphasis on **experiential learning**, rational inquiry (Nyaya), and metaphysical exploration (Darshanas). It recognizes the cyclical nature of time, encourages introspection, and promotes harmony between humanity and nature. The traditional Gurukul system embodied these principles by nurturing character formation, discipline, dialogue, and reflective thinking. Education was not viewed merely as preparation for livelihood but as a pathway toward self-realization and liberation (moksha).

By incorporating IKS into higher education, institutions can cultivate cultural confidence and intellectual self-awareness among students. At the same time, it opens new avenues for interdisciplinary research, encouraging the application of indigenous knowledge systems to contemporary global challenges. The sustained growth of literature within IKS stands as evidence of India's enduring commitment to inquiry, dialogue, and holistic understanding—making it highly relevant to modern academic discourse.

Rabindranath Tagore: Early Life and Education

Rabindranath Tagore was born on May 7, 1861, into the illustrious Tagore family of Jorasanko, Calcutta (now Kolkata), a family known for its deep involvement in reform movements, literature, and art. His father, Debendranath Tagore, was a philosopher and one of the founders of the Brahmo Samaj, a reformist Hindu movement that emphasized monotheism, rationalism, and ethical living. His mother, Sarada Devi, passed away when Rabindranath was quite young.

The life of Rabindranath was shaped by philosophy, literature, and music which means he received a very unique form of education. He was not a fan of conventional schooling and was easily taught by private tutors who taught him in a one-on-one setting. He picked up languages such as Sanskrit, Bengali, English, and even Persian. In addition to secular texts, he also read Indian classical music and religious texts like the Upanishads. In 1878, he attended a school in Brighton, England, with hopes of becoming a barrister, but he was far more captivated by literature and music. While he did not finish his education overseas, his time in England introduced him to European literary movements, Romanticism, and Enlightenment philosophy fascinations that, upon his return to India, blended with his Indian sensibilities.

Through his self-directed education, Tagore developed an integrative perspective that placed a strong emphasis on respect for individual freedom, harmony with environment, and the arts. These principles ultimately came together to form his educational experiment, Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan, which came to represent his holistic perspective.

Influence of Indian Knowledge System (IKS) on Tagore

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) encapsulates the diverse strands of Indian thought and cultivation, which includes Indian philosophy, Ayurveda, Vedic math, classical music and dance, Sanskrit literature, astronomy, ethics, political thought, yoga, dharma, folk culture, and ancient teaching systems such as gurukulas. Rabindranath Tagore deeply engaged with IKS and it shaped and informed his work and life as a thinker, writer, and educator.

The Vedic and Upanishads profoundly shaped Tagore's spirituality and philosophy. Tagore, saw them as the greatest achievement of Indian thought, which he acknowledged for the philosophy of oneness, deep realization, and for the blend of existence. This is evident in his works Gitanjali, The Religion of Man, and Sadhana.

Tagore's philosophy and his belief on the Indian heritage of oneness of all being, the incalculable essence of the eternal in man, and the necessity of the spirit's independence is well aligned with the Upanishadic saying of "Tat Tvam Asi".



God as described above is nature, and art, and human love, is approachable and not remote, which is also rooted in the same tradition.

In Gitanjali, which earned him a Nobel, Tagore composed:

“Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!

Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?

Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground...”

This illustrates how Tagore's understanding of divinity is action-based, humanistic, and immanent, deeply rooted in Vedantic philosophy.

In regard with the concept of Education in IKS and Tagore's Vision, he rejected the British colonial education system, which emphasized memorization and utilitarianism, in favor of Indian educational philosophies that emphasized experiential learning, moral development, and the pursuit of truth. His Santiniketan was modeled after the gurukula system, where the teacher (guru) and students lived together in an open natural setting. He believed that nature was the best teacher and that education should foster creativity, aesthetic sensitivity, spiritual depth, and social responsibility. This is aligned with the ancient Indian view of holistic education, as seen in the Taittiriya Upanishad, which lists the five layers of human development i.e., physical, vital, mental, intellectual, and spiritual, all of which should be nurtured. Tagore's educational philosophy thus mirrored this integral view of human development.

In reference to the music and the Indian Classical Tradition, Tagore was a gifted musician. He wrote more than 2,000 songs that are now included in the Rabindra Sangeet. His music combined poetry lyrics with folk melodies, Baul philosophy, and the traditional raga system.

Tagore was profoundly influenced by the Bengali mystical minstrels known as the Baul tradition. Their straightforward songs, which echoed India's Bhakti and Sufi traditions, focused on love, humanity, and the divinity within. For example, Tagore's poem *Ekla Cholo Re* (Walk Alone) embodies the Baul ideal of devotion and spiritual independence outside of the mainstream.

Additionally, he included aspects of the rich Indian musical tradition, including Dhrupad, Kirtan, Bhatiali, and Tappa genres. His profound admiration for Indian music's aesthetic and spiritual power shows how IKS influenced his work.

Although Tagore was proficient in English and influenced by Western poets such as Shelley, Yeats, and Wordsworth, he chose to write primarily in Bengali, reviving and enriching the literary tradition of his mother tongue. He drew from Sanskrit poetics, especially Rasa theory, the concept of evoking specific emotions in art. His works like *Chitra*, *Shyama*, *Malini*, and *Karna-Kunti Samvad* reinterpreted Puranic and epic themes from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, but in modern idioms.

Tagore's narrative style, symbolism, and metaphysical inquiry were inspired by Indian *kavya* traditions. His drama, dance-dramas, and poetry often fuse classical literary aesthetics with socially relevant themes, reflecting a seamless blend of IKS and modernism.

Unlike militant nationalism, Tagore envisioned *Swaraj* (self-rule) as self-realization — both individually and collectively. His critique of narrow nationalism was based on the Indian spiritual idea of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family). He emphasized universal human values, cooperation, and ethical living over territorial or racial pride.

His interpretation of *Bharat Mata* was not as a warrior goddess, but as a nurturing presence which symbolises compassion, unity, and spiritual heritage. In his essay *Swadeshi Samaj*, Tagore articulates how local self-governance, revival of indigenous industries, and educational reforms can be avenues for true freedom, echoing the wisdom of ancient Indian civic life.

Tagore engaged in profound dialogues with scientists like Albert Einstein, reflecting on the nature of reality, consciousness, and the universe. His vision of the cosmos was deeply shaped by Indian cosmological ideas found in texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Sankhya* philosophy, and *Tantric* thought, which propose a dynamic interplay between the physical and the metaphysical.



While he was critical of blind orthodoxy, Tagore's openness to reason, dialogue, and experimentation reflects the spirit of Nyaya and Vaisheshika traditions of Indian logic and science. His creative engagement with both spirituality and science exemplifies the IKS ideal of anubhav (experience) and vichara (critical inquiry).

II. CONCLUSION

In addition to his literary prowess, Rabindranath Tagore was regarded as an outstanding ambassador of Indian and global culture for his broad outlook that brought the Indian Knowledge System into harmony with contemporary humanistic principles. His life and work demonstrate that tradition does not have to be sacrificed for advancement; on the contrary, it may be the rich soil from which a vibrant, inclusive, and spiritual modernity can emerge. Through his writings, music, educational reforms, and philosophical reflections, Tagore shed light on how India's ancient wisdom which includes, its commitment to truth, unity, beauty, and freedom could provide significant answers to today's pressing issues. Educators, artists, and philosophers worldwide who strive for a harmonious fusion of knowledge, creativity, and compassion are still motivated by his legacy.

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