

'Only What Does Not Fit In Can Be True'

De-professionalisation and Academia in Relation to Adorno and Tagore

ROSINKA CHAUDHURI

This paper explores de-professionalisation—interpreted here as the experience of finding that the work one does, does not fit into the demands of the profession—in the context of Theodor Adorno and Rabindranath Tagore. While both were writers, they were also part of the academic world and it is their grappling with the demands of academia that this paper looks into and elucidates.

This paper was presented at a symposium on “De-professionalisation” organised by Amit Chaudhuri and Jon Cook of the University of East Anglia at the India International Centre, Delhi, 7–8 January 2016. The concept note for the symposium stated: “The subject of the symposium is ‘de-professionalisation’—the urge, as a creative practitioner, or, indeed, a practitioner of any kind, not to be identified with one genre or activity, and to be, in general, a critic of specialisation and a champion of dabbling. The word ‘dabbling’ is being used here partly ironically, of course, but also full on, to convey the force of what a serious writer or thinker might achieve when they consciously diverge from the genre or practice they’re most identified with and even respected for. The idea and act of ‘de-professionalisation’ is really a critique of the construction of the writer, artist, or intellectual today—by publishers, by media, by festivals, by writers themselves. It also accommodates the notion of value: for instance, the idea that someone may not be ‘good’ at or trained in the skills of a particular project or genre or form they’ve embarked upon.”

Rosinka Chaudhuri (rosinkac@gmail.com) is with the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

I shall be dealing here with de-professionalisation in the academic sphere in the context of Theodor Adorno and Rabindranath Tagore, who were “writers” above all else, but also had a relationship with academia: it is their struggle with the demands of academia that I wish to investigate particularly. The theme of de-professionalisation, interpreted here as the experience of finding that the work one does, does not fit into the demands of the profession, seemed to reside at two levels in this context. The first is the inability to find a place for your subject matter within the straitjackets of current academic or publishing imperatives that have been put in place by these professions. The second is a relatively rare condition: to find that that inability may be a direct consequence not just of content, but of the form and style in which the text is written, which makes it unfit for inclusion or wider dissemination within the parameters that the profession demands.

In the case of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, what Hullot-Kentor calls his “paratactical style” (which I shall come to later) makes his writing there “difficult” or “obscure,” making this work “obliquely remote,” at the time, to the national literary spheres of both Germany and the United States (us), where it was not “received” well. “And this remoteness,” the translator says, “is requisite to any plausible value it may have. For as Adorno wrote in constantly varied formulations, only what does not fit in can be true.”¹

Standard biographical entries on Adorno available on the internet, from Wikipedia to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, narrate the facts of his return to Europe in tones of quiet vindication, leaving out any suggestion of failure or disappointment: “At the end of October 1949,” declares an astonishingly long and detailed Wikipedia entry, “Adorno left America for Europe just as *The Authoritarian Personality* was being published. Before his return, Adorno had not only reached an agreement with a Tübingen publisher to print an expanded version of *The Philosophy of New Music*, but completed two compositions ... etc.” The editors of the *Adorno Critical Reader*, Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin, on the other hand, tell exactly the opposite story: “Miffed by an American publisher’s decision to reject *The Philosophy of New Music*, Adorno felt that the us did not appreciate the value of his work.”² Hullot-Kentor too interprets Adorno’s return to Germany as a failure to fit in, stating that throughout his years in the us, Adorno met with the rejection of his works by publishers on many occasions,

who found his writings simply too disorganised. He says: “It was obvious to Adorno that what he was pursuing required his return to Germany if only because in the 1950s publishing was still less commercially united than in the us and permitted writers greater control over their work ...”. He continues:

One event did, however, finally prompt him to leave. When the editorial board at the Psychoanalytic Society of San Francisco finished with his essay ‘Psychoanalysis Revised,’ he found that [and here he’s quoting from Adorno] ‘the entire text was disfigured beyond recognition, the basic intention could not be discerned.’ As Adorno recounted, the head editor explained that the standards to which the essay had been adjusted, which made it look like every other essay in the journal, were those of the profession: ‘I would only be standing in my own way’—Adorno recalls—‘if I passed up its advantages. I passed them up nevertheless.’ Adorno moved back to Europe. (p xi)

De-professionalisation, for Adorno, was of course the norm: even a rudimentary acquaintance with his life’s work reveals he wrote on subjects ranging from musicology to metaphysics and that his writing span included such things as philosophical analyses of Hegelian metaphysics, a critical study of the astrology column of the *Los Angeles Times*, and the music of, among others, Beethoven and Schoenberg, not to mention jazz. “In terms of both style and content, Adorno’s writings defy convention” seems to be the leitmotif of commentators on his work. In this refusal to fit into any one sphere of specialisation, of course, he embodies the notion of “de-professionalisation”—“the urge, as a creative practitioner, or, indeed, a practitioner of any kind, *not* to be identified with one genre or activity,” but whether one could dare to say he was “in general, a critic of specialisation and a champion of dabbling” I do not know; I would suspect he might have demanded specialisation in dabbling instead.³

Adorno’s return to Germany too is presented in Hullot-Kentor’s translator’s introduction in contrast to the popular version (“Upon his return, Adorno helped shape the political culture of West Germany”) to reiterate, instead, again, the theme of not fitting in:

This is not to say that Adorno returned to Germany to fit in and help restore the nation to what it once was. What he wrote was completely unpalatable to the former—Nazi faculty, still in its prime, that controlled Frankfurt University after the war. They rejected writings such as *Minima Moralia* as unscholarly and the whole of Adorno’s work as essayistic and fragmentary and saw to it that he was not offered a professorship. (p xviii)

That full professorship, denied him over the years, was granted finally only in July 1957, when he became chair in both philosophy and sociology at the University of Frankfurt and head of the Institute of Social Research. Did the choices he made against professionalisation entail an active “separatism”—and is that the case for any deprofessionalised intellectual—in that these choices to “not belong” entail the production of works and careers that “stand outside and look in” rather than belong?

The Domain of the Text

Adorno’s experience of academic publishing in the us in the 1940s may perhaps hold true even today, as the Alan Sokal *Social Text* imbroglio so ostentatiously demonstrated two

decades or so ago, and the publishing history of *Aesthetic Theory* points to the pressures of conformity that have governed in academic editorial offices for some time now. The first translation of this book was by C Lenhardt for Routledge and Kegan Paul (London and New York 1984), and the history of its publication is worth exploring in the context of the demands of professionalisation. Fearing that the form of the book would impede the book’s consumption (and in line with marketing wisdom that fervently feels that consumption is only geared to the homogenised product, thus no doubt vindicating the argument of *The Culture Industry*⁴), the publisher, partly against the wishes of the translator, interfered with the original. While the final version Adorno left rejected the division of the book into chapters, the publisher reinserted numbered chapters; where the text had run on in long sentences with subclauses, the publisher inserted headings and subheadings; paragraph indentations were introduced arbitrarily throughout, and a general image was presented of a sequence of sentences flowing in one direction alone that could be followed chronologically from the first chapter to the last. To achieve this compulsory unification, a structure was imposed that only managed to set whole passages adrift. In order to span the now disparate sections, phrases such as “as we saw” or “as we said” or “let us remember” were added. The rejection of the work’s form entailed its content being conveniently presented as a progressive argument, causing it, Hullot-Kentor asserts, “to collapse internally.” Drawing away from the “movement of thought that can still be sensed gesturing underneath [gave] the book a disembodied quality, as if it were dubbed rather than translated” (p xiii).

The ironical result of all of this manoeuvring was that rather than bridge the distance between Adorno and the readers of the book, the work was made even more impregnable. This happened because there was no argumentative structure in the original text itself, which lacked any homogeneous content that could be read from start to finish; the simulated paragraphs therefore only appeared clouded and impenetrable as a consequence. This was because the coherence of Adorno’s concepts relied on the subterranean relations made between them, depending, rather, on what is called “its paratactical form,” and here I wish to insert a proposal to relate these descriptions of Adorno’s prose in *Aesthetic Theory* to almost all of the songs and some of the poems of Rabindranath Tagore (most famously, for example in *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*, 1912, which won him the Nobel Prize), which seem, as well, to be paratactical works as they are defined in the context of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*.

The translator’s introduction to *Aesthetic Theory* defines paratactical works as those, we learn, which, “with few exceptions,” are “short, fragmentary, and compacted by the crisis of their own abbreviation. Paratactical texts are intensive, almost to the denial of their quality of extension; and the more extensive the paratactical work actually is—and *Aesthetic Theory* is almost unparalleled in this—the greater the potential for its unravelling at each and every point. The text there requires a rhetoric that will heighten concentration and

density and absorb the dozens of ways in which it is constantly exposed” (p xiv). Digressing for a moment, it may be worth exploring here whether the form of Adorno’s sentences in the paratactical text comes into existence owing to the pressure of the language in which they were originally composed. Frederic Jameson, in *Late Marxism*, certainly seems to think that Adorno’s sentences, in particular,

try to recover the intricately bound spatial freedom of Latin declension, objects that grandly precede subjects, and a play of gendered nouns that the mind scans by means of the appropriately modified relative. Chiasmus here becomes the structural echo by one part of the sentence of another, distant in time and space; and the result of these internal operations is the closure of the aphorism itself; definitive, yet a forthright act that passes on, not into silence, but into other acts and gestures.

A New Word Structure

Calling Lenhardt’s 1984 English translation of *Aesthetic Theory* “misguided,” Jameson feels that this text should then be the occasion “of forging a powerful new Germanic sentence structure in English,” as the “literate and respectable British text” Lenhardt produces is no longer even recognisable.⁵

The parallel with Rabindranath’s songs and poems, which in themselves too are “short, fragmentary, and compacted by the crisis of their own abbreviation,” seems to me to be useful. Unfortunately for Tagore, very few translators have attempted to retranslate his lines by “forging a powerful new Bengali sentence structure in English,” forging the “literate and respectable British text” that generations of translators have instead produced. His poetic texts are paratactical in as much as they too are “intensive, almost to the denial of their quality of extension.” The coherence of the subterranean relations made through the word-structures and spatial organisation of the text in Tagore’s songs is understood, it is my contention, by the same logic used to decipher Adorno here, where the aim in translation is susceptible to failure. Rather, the translator would do well to take her lead from Adorno’s description of the hearing implicit to Mahler’s music that Hullot-Kentor invokes: “an ‘amplitude of a hearing encompassing the far distance, to which the most remote analogies and consequences are virtually present’” (p xiii). Adorno’s text’s intention survives, then, only by what the translator calls “a density of insight, not by external structure. This defines the text’s—and its translation’s—particular vulnerability: the slightest slackening of intensity threatens to dissolve the text into a miscellany. Nothing supports the text except the intensity with which it draws on and pushes against itself” (Hullot-Kentor). Elsewhere, I have described the process by which Tagore translated his own Bengali poems for the English *Gitanjali*, abandoning “external structure” and even entire phrases for new ones, attempting thereby—not always successfully—to avoid that “slackening of intensity” so inimical to the experience of reading his poems.⁶

A heightening of “concentration and density” is what characterises the language Tagore uses, so often described by commentators and critics in his time as numinous, vague and wishy-washy. Akshay Chandra Sarkar, formidable editor of the

Sadharani and friend of Bankimchandra’s, said in his review of the 20-year-old Rabindranath’s *Bhagna Hriday* (1881) that:

The poet Rabindra is inordinately fond of the half-bloomed nature of things. The moonlight that is present in page after page of his poetry is not a clear, bright moonlight; it is a flickering sleepy moonlight that the poet loves. And then on page 31 there is the indifferent impropriety of a phrase such as ‘*astamān jāmini*’ [setting night]. In the first place, the night does not set; on top of that ‘setting night’ is another form of violence upon the language.⁷

Quite apart from the merit or demerit of this particular volume of poetry, which Tagore called “rubbish” in his old age, refusing permission to have it reprinted, this “violence upon the language” was not something he would be deterred from as his oeuvre developed over time.⁸ Of the paratactical text of Adorno, it is said: “it rejects certitude as a standard of truth in favour of exactness of insight,” which makes it “inimical to exposition.” Other techniques, such as “condensed reference, used constantly by Adorno,” often cannot be incorporated at all into an English translation because it remains so “uniquely a potential of the original,” and one more aspect of German, “the use of pronouns” also applies to the difficulties in translating from the Bengali. An additional aspect of the paratactical text seen as problematic is that in it, “Adorno is constantly compelled to start anew, saying what has already been said Thus Adorno throughout restates major motifs ...” (p xvi).

Almost each and every one of these features can be found in Tagore and illustrated by examples. I will not go into a detailed exposition here; perhaps just one song will suffice. In a famous song written in the winter of 1937, four years before he died, “*śrābaner pabane ākul bishanna sandhyāy*” (In this evening made melancholy by the fervent wind of *śrāban*), he uses, as he has many times before in varied forms, the phrase *gandhaghana andhakare* to describe the darkness in the dense and shaded woods of the fragrant *kadamba* flower so common in Bengal. Now *gandhaghana* is not a word you will find in the dictionary, it is a compound word, a new word-structure to convey both fragrance (*gandha*) and density (*ghana*); the entire line may be translated as “In the densely fragrant *kadamba* woods’ darkness...” (These Bengali compound words, it may be worth pointing out, are different from the compound words used, for instance, by Bankimchandra Chatterjee in his novels, which were far more Sanskritised and conventional word forms than are to be found here.) Again, if we look at the last two lines of the song,

dake tabu hriday mama mane mane rikta bhobane,
rodon-jaga sangihara asim sunye.

(Yet in this empty house my heart still calls out within me,
In this tear-filled, wakeful, companion-less, endless emptiness)

It is the last line here that creates the difficulty for the translator. The compound word *rodon-jaga*, used to describe the solitude of the companionless (*sangihara*—also a compound word used often by him), is rendered by me as “tear-filled, wakeful”—two words that inadequately conjure the tear washed evocation of an awakened dusk. Further, the English translation of *asim sūnye* as “endless emptiness” fails to bring

to the page the remote analogy made there to the vastness of the sky—the word *sūnya* is another word for space or sky in Bengali. One needs here exactly that description of the hearing implicit to Mahler's music described by Adorno himself: the "amplitude of a hearing encompassing the far distance, to which the most remote analogies and consequences are virtually present."⁹

Many of the difficulties of Adorno's text in *Aesthetic Theory* arise, of course, because they occur in the domain of complex critical thought, whereas the same qualities would not be out of place in poetry. "Restating major motifs," "condensed reference," or "exactness of insight" are attributes of poetry; that the concentration and density of Tagore's poetry has rarely been achieved in translation may well point simply to a failure of translation at a fundamental level—more a failure of nerve such as Adorno's editors had. But it is also commonly acknowledged that Tagore's poetry is uniquely difficult to present in translation, and reading about the particular difficulties in translating *Aesthetic Theory* may well make us more aware of the manner in which the approach may need to change.

The Domain of Experience

I wish to move this exploration of de-professionalisation in the context of Adorno and Tagore now, in the second part of this paper, into the domain of experience. Tagore was born in 1861, and as a young man would not have been subjected to the pressures of professionalisation except in the requirements of the colonial schooling system or career planning already in place by then. Nevertheless, the family was rich enough and idiosyncratic enough to allow him to mature (after leaving as many as four schools five times) without putting him through exams, very much as a Renaissance man, learning from private tutors and erudite family friends as he grew.¹⁰ Precocious and talented, he developed in the domains of music and song, poetry and criticism, editorship and dramatic performance without succumbing to the pressures of professionalisation, which must have already been embodied for him in the figure of his professional older brother, Satyendranath Tagore, first Indian ICS (but also author, composer, linguist). De-professionalisation, or, as I said at the start, the experience of finding that the work one does, does not fit into the demands of the profession, was never too much of an issue for a scion of the Tagore family (although the weight of the expectations of elders bore down on him too when he was young).¹¹ His family defrayed the expenses of almost all his early endeavours, whether publishing books of poems or collections of letters, financing dramatic productions, or starting family magazines such as *Bharati* that he edited and where most of his early criticism and essays are to be found. Nevertheless, the wider world did exert exactly those demands of professionalisation from his writing, as we shall briefly see later.

Tagore was 52 when he won the Nobel Prize in 1913 for *Gitanjali*, already very much a public persona in Bengali letters, primarily known as a poet, but no less so because of his political activism during the agitations against the partition of Bengal tabled by Lord Curzon in 1905 that continued till the

plan was dropped in 1911. In the middle of that period, however, he withdrew from the movement, retreating from the intimidation and violence that erupted from 1907 onwards. Most Bengalis, including some his friends, were critical of him now, regarding him, in the words of Nirad Chaudhuri, "as an apostate." Adorno's stand, on the other hand, against the protesting students of 1968 in Frankfurt, refusing to produce "a theory engaged in the liberation of the oppressed" is explained as part and parcel of his "negative dialectic," Gibson and Rubin feel. "The notion of autonomy was the closest he got to 'liberation,'" they write, calling their Introduction "The Autonomous Intellectual," for they see that he found the student's "actionism" akin to Nazi anti-intellectualism that sacrificed independent thinking for immediate goals. "The project of personal autonomy" is prioritised, they said, "over what he sees as the 'manipulated public sphere'."¹² Tagore's withdrawal from the swadeshi movement at its height brings to mind not just Gandhi's famous retreat after Chauri Chaura, but a continent and a few decades into the future, Adorno's defence of his position in 1968 in "Resignation": "the uncompromisingly critical thinker, who neither signs over his consciousness nor lets himself be terrorised into action, is in truth the one who does not give in."¹³ Not fitting in, of course, always has a strong element of not giving in, and de-professionalisation seems to contain within its premises a strong notion of the ethical imperative, wherein one's own notion of right and wrong takes precedence over public pressure on individual action to be taken or not taken in the public sphere.

Tagore's refusal to fit in is well known to scholars, as his excoriation at the hands of hostile reviewers in his younger days was unprecedented in Bengali letters. That hostility would return, despite the Nobel Prize, at the end of his life in the open antagonism of the largely Marxist Calcutta critics of the 1920s and 1930s who attacked what they perceived to be the transcendentalism of the older poet. As such, criticism of his work and what he was perceived to represent, was not so much on account of professionalisation per se as much as it was related to his work's ethos. He was criticised, therefore, not just by professional academics such as Dineshchandra Sen, who privately let Edward Thompson know that: His (Tagore's) mode of thinking is so essentially English that I appreciate his English translation of the *Gitanjali* far better than the original Bengali, but by newspaper reviewers and by rival schools of poetry (such as the Kallol group) as well.¹⁴ It led the aged poet to say, with a devastating matter-of-factness, in the Preface to the *Rabindra Rachanabali*, his *Complete Works*: "No other writer has ever had to endure a disrespect that was so continuous, so unabashed, so unkind, and so unchecked as I have."¹⁵

Tagore had, in the course of his career, changed the form of Bengali poetry, reshaping the style in which it was written, pioneered the short story and his more important novels in a new and different mode from that which had gone before. Crucially, he was also writing in a new literary language that was more sensuous and less formal, but the arena that he sought to de-professionalise the most actively was, of course, that of education. His numerous essays and lectures since the

1890s on the failings of Indian higher education had resulted in famous pieces such as “Indian Students and Western Teachers” in 1916, and the acerbic fable, *Tota Kahini (The Parrot’s Training)* about the parrot that received such a rigorous schooling from the pundits on the orders of the raja that it dies, choked to death on the papers of its textbook education. Even the introduction of Bengali at Calcutta University at the MA level filled him with doubt, and he wrote:

I have found that the direct influence which the Calcutta University wields over our language is not strengthening and vitalising, but pedantic and narrow. It tries to perpetuate the anachronisms of preserving Pundit-made Bengali [and] is everyday becoming a more formidable obstacle in the way of our boys’ acquiring that mastery of their mother tongue which is of life and literature.¹⁶

Of course we must remember also that on the other side, professional Bengali scholars had had so many misgivings about his language that they had included it in BA exam questions asking students to rewrite passages by him in chaste Bengali, as Nirad Chaudhuri has attested to in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*.

Visva-Bharati, the university he founded near the town of Bolpur in a place he came to call Santiniketan, was formally inaugurated in December 1921. He had first conceived of Visva-Bharati (another compound word he made up) in the orange groves of California in 1916 in terms that lay outside the “limits,” as he put it, “of nation and geography.” The “fields of Bolpur” would witness “universal union” and Santiniketan become “the connecting thread between India and the world.”¹⁷ To achieve this union of the world—*visva*—with the goddess of learning—Bharati, another name for Saraswati—he worked tirelessly to attract scholars and teachers from across the world and of course India. It is the quarrel that developed between him and India’s foremost historian at the time, Sir Jadunath Sarkar, when he invited Sarkar to be member of the governing body at Visva-Bharati that I want to end this discussion with, simply because it throws the whole notion of professionalisation in the context of education into such sharp focus.

The Poet, the Historian and a Quarrel

These two men, it should be made clear at the start, were not just friends from when they first made each other’s acquaintance in 1910, but admirers of each other’s work, each in his own field; Tagore very much the famous poet who was to go on to acquire world renown, and Sarkar, who taught English literature and history at Patna College from 1899 to 1926, going on to become a legendary historian of austere habits who had produced some of the most magisterial volumes on Indian history ever written. Sarkar had translated 13 essays and four short stories of Tagore’s into English for the *Modern Review* between 1910 and 1913, and their views on education too were not wholly antithetical. Sarkar admired the fact that the medium of instruction in the school at Santiniketan was Bengali, even writing an essay on the subject: “The Vernacular Medium: Views of an Old Teacher.” In the context of the de-professionalised intellectual, what is of interest is that, as

Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, “Sarkar had struggled all his life to give history a ‘proper’ academic form in India” although neither Sarkar nor his friend and correspondent, Govindrao Sakharam Sardesai (1865–1969), were, “in today’s terms, a ‘professional’ historian;” they were what we would, without intending any insult, call “amateurs.”¹⁸ As Chakrabarty says to elucidate further, the argumentation and work that these men are known for was produced “not within the domain we call the university but in the public domain writing for a general readership.”¹⁹

That Sarkar was an amateur at a time when the word was understood differently from now is something we need to keep in mind. In his time, arguably, it was a term of particular merit, denoting a situation untainted by pecuniary motive, powered by passion and possessed of the highest skill set—as in “amateur detective”—in a colonial modernity that set great store by such paradigms. At the turn of the century, Indian historiography in the Western sense of the term was still in its formative stages. In Bengal, History as an academic discipline had begun to be institutionalised from the time of Rajendralal Mitra (1822–91), admiringly described as “the man who raised studies in Indian history and culture to a scientific status.”²⁰ Associated with the Asiatic Society all his life, the author of *Antiques of Orissa* (1872) and other significant publications, he was, without a doubt, a singular figure in his time. It was only with the next generation of scholars such as Haraprasad Shastri, Akshaykumar Maitreya and Ramaprasad Chanda that history-writing began to acquire a dedicated community and a disciplinary outlook that was then further reinforced by the work of Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay and Sarkar—all of whom, nonetheless, were “amateur” historians in that none of them were exclusively confined to history as a discipline in university departments. The very notion of the professional historian thus solidified into being at a gradual pace between the 1890s and 1920s in India, almost a century after Leopold von Ranke, considered among the founding fathers of modern source-based history and whom Jadunath described as a “transcendent historical genius,” was first appointed to a post at the University of Berlin in 1825, an institution which nurtured his career both in the classroom and outside of it his entire life.²¹

Meanwhile, Tagore’s involvement in the creation of a unique awareness of India’s past at a popular level was never contested by someone like Sarkar. Apart from his numerous historical poems, plays, and novels between 1898 and 1912, Tagore wrote significant prefaces and introductions to contemporary Sikh, Maratha and Muslim histories, contributing 18 serious articles on history, now collected and published as a separate book by Visva-Bharati press called *Itihāsh [History]*. Apart from these there exist other articles such as *Bhāratbarsher itihāsh [Indian History]*, *Bhārat-itihāsh-charchā [Indian Historiography]*, and *Bharatbarsher itihāsh dhārā [The Flow of Indian History]*, which attest to his interventionist interest in Indian history and culture. The general readership that Sarkar addressed, then, belonged to the same public sphere that enthusiastically responded to these writings on history by a poet too;

professionalisation at the university and disciplinary level seemed not to be an essential requirement for history writing as yet in India at least.

The first serious crack in the relationship between Sarkar and Tagore was fatal to it, breaking the friendship beyond repair. It was occasioned by the contents of Sarkar's long letter of 31 May 1922 to Tagore declining a governing body position at the newly constituted university. He was refusing this prestigious post, he said, for two important reasons. The first of these was practical: the distance between Darjeeling, where he intended to retire in a few months and Santiniketan was too great. The second reason was elaborated upon at some length. The school at Santiniketan (that had preceded the university), he still thought of highly for the character and heart with which it endowed its pupils, making them "complete human beings" (*sundar sampurna manushya*).²² (But in the department of the "head" or of education alone, he reminded the poet that he himself had said to him that there the foundations were weak.) But a university, he felt, demanded much more, and the main sticking point for him was, as he put it in his own English words: "intellectual discipline and exact knowledge" among the students. At the high school level and the postgraduate level he could still envision the students at Visva-Bharati functioning successfully; however, at the university level they would fail because they had not been put through the "grind"—again his own word inserted in parenthesis in English in this Bengali letter. The students at this level in Santiniketan, he said, were taught to despise exact knowledge and intellectual discipline, looking down on those who practised them as "fake pundits," "dry and heartless enemies of the complete man." They look only to "emotion," to "synthesis of knowledge." But however poetic the silver aeroplane in the sky might look, it was still the fruit of *exact knowledge*, a lot of research, many tests and retests and much sacrifice. It was not created out of joy.

Sarkar's rebuttal of "joy" here is a pointed one. Joy, or *ananda*, was a word that had great resonance for Rabindranath. Repeatedly, he had written in his poems and songs of celebration, of delight, and of the festival of joy that is this world: *jagate ānanda jagye āmār nimantran* (I have been invited to be part of the ritual worship of joy in this world). The Upanishadic *ānandam*—visible in the inscription above the gate at Visva-Bharati—was torn from its scriptural devotional roots by Tagore and turned into the secular and poetic *ānanda*—it lay, as he reasserted on many occasions, at the very foundations of his own philosophy. Sarkar is being practical in his objection that students who wish to research India's ancient past must already have mastered economics and political science as well as one other language in their BA classes—it is not enough to know Sanskrit alone, he says, they need to pass BA exams on the history of Greece, Babylon, and Egypt and on political philosophy or else their minds will remain narrow—that is, *exact knowledge*, as is provided in a lowly conventional college (*mamuli college*) is required, and that learning is not provided at Bolpur. Relentlessly, he piles on example after example: Jagadish Chandra Bose would never have proved that plants

have life by saying that that had already been proclaimed in the Upanishads, he had to prove it scientifically; volumes of authentic Pali and Buddhist literature had been made possible by endless dry hard work, etc. India must find its place in the modern world, and the way forward was not to return to the Vedanta but to build up new stores of knowledge so that it may contribute exact knowledge to the 20th century and to the world. This it would not be possible to do in Bolpur.

Tagore's thought and action with regard to Visva-Bharati was expectedly inflected with his own unique world view. Railing, as he always had, against pedantry and punditry, he had wanted his own university students not to "try to drown the natural spontaneity of their expression under some stagnant formalism" as was the norm, he felt, at Calcutta University. In a speech in which he tried first to define Visva-Bharati to the world, he said: "the trouble is that as soon as we think of a university, the idea of Oxford, Cambridge, and a host of other European universities rushes in and fills our mind."²³ Stating clearly that he had never harboured any distrust towards other cultures, he said, that nevertheless, "[The culture of the West] must become for us nourishment and not a burden. We must gain mastery over it and not live on sufferance as hewers of texts and drawers of book-learning."²⁴ It was perhaps in the interests of the department of Indology that he wished to involve Sarkar; certainly he had held Sarkar's probity and integrity in the highest respect, writing of him even after the split to a friend: "There is a great honesty in Jadubabu ... I cannot disrespect him even if he has no regard for me" (p 114).

Nature of University Education

The tussle between the two men regarding the nature of a university education goes to the heart of the argument over de-professionalisation. Tagore's insistence on his vision and his ideal was not just ideational, but anchored in a real withdrawal even from the funds he so desperately needed. Not only did he repeatedly refuse donations for Visva-Bharati that came with conditions attached, saying he would not allow anyone to 'put a chain on his feet,'²⁵ he shot down Rothenstein's efforts towards raising support in London in 1921 for an international university saying "I made use of the word 'University' for the sake of convenience ... I should not allow my idea to be pinned to a word like a dead butterfly for a foreign museum ... I saved my Santiniketan from being trampled into smoothness by the steam roller of your Education department...)" (p 120).²⁶ This does not prevent us from seeing the point of Sarkar's dogged advocacy of professionalisation in the interests of accurate research and what he calls exact knowledge. "I'm a terrible philistine," he apologises, but I am a professional teacher (*peshadar gurumahasay*)—"of the head, not the heart," he adds—trying to train pundits.²⁷ He is willing to accept the dictates of the Upanishads in stories, poems or religious discourses, but not in training students. In response, Tagore had replied that he wanted his students not just to be well trained, but to be able to think imaginatively as well.

The debate between the two goes back to the foundations of the disciplines and the professionalisation of university education in Victorian Europe and England. Where Sarkar advocated Henry Newman's position that the university's chief aim was the distribution of knowledge, Tagore saw that "the real sphere of education was there where there was invention or creation of knowledge. The main work of a University was the generation of knowledge, and its secondary task its dissemination" (p 116), he said. Whether that was practicable or possible in a world which demanded that a university should hand out degrees to would-be professionals was another matter altogether.

In "Education after Auschwitz," Adorno had assumed nothing other than a radical reform of society, that he had argued could begin through the transformation of education into a system of sociological critique.²⁸ This kind of critical education was nowhere in sight, but it might manage perhaps to reform the people "down below." Once again invoking "autonomy," he called it "the single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz ... autonomy [or] the power of reflection, self-determination, not cooperating." The goal of education and culture is for Adorno nothing less than "the production of a correct consciousness."²⁹ Tagore might have agreed.

NOTES

- 1 Theodor W Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Newly translated edited and with a translator's introduction by Robert Hullot-Kentor, London: Bloomsbury, 2014, p xix. All subsequent citations are from this volume.
- 2 Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin, *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, p 10.
- 3 Concept note for symposium on "De-professionalisation" organised by the University of East Anglia at India International Centre, Delhi, 7–8 January 2016.
- 4 Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed, J M Bernstein, London: Routledge, 1991.
- 5 Frederic Jameson, "A Note on Editions and Translations," *Late Marxism: Adorno or The Persistence of the Dialectic*, London: Verso, 1990, p ix.
- 6 Rosinka Chaudhuri, "Rabindranath translated to Tagore: *Gitanjali Song Offerings*, 1912" in *A History of Indian Poetry in English*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp 130–47.
- 7 Cited in Prashantakumar Pal, *Rabijibani*, Vol 2, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2007, p 105.
- 8 For a further discussion, see Rosinka Chaudhuri, *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp 289–325.
- 9 Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Chicago, 1992, p 84.
- 10 Between the ages of six and 13, Rabindranath was put into, and taken out of, school a total of five times—attending the Oriental Seminary, then the Normal School, then Bengal Academy, which he left and then re-entered again the next year, and finally, a few days at St Xavier's School, Calcutta.
- 11 He subsequently recalled his older sister as having said, "We had all expected that when he grows up, Rabi will be a man (*bara hoyiā Rabi manuser mato hoibe*), but more than anybody else, it is he who has disappointed." He had also realised, he wrote later, that "my value in genteel society was declining." (*bhadrasamājer bājāre amār dar kamiyā jāiteche*). Prabodhchandra Sen, 'Rabindranather Balyarachana,' ['Rabindranath's Childhood Writings'] in Gargi Datta edited *Bhorer Pākhī O Aryānya Prabandha*, Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1998, p 53.
- 12 *A Critical Reader*, p 18.
- 13 Quoted in Gibson and Rubin, p 14.
- 14 Cited in Dipesh Chakravarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, p 158.
- 15 Rabindranath Tagore, Preface to *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol 1, Calcutta: Vishwabharati Press, 2002, p 17.
- 16 Same as note 15.
- 17 Andrew Robinson and Krishna Datta, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad Minded Man*, London: Bloomsbury, 1995, p 205.
- 18 Dipesh Chakravarty, *The Calling of History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, p 4.
- 19 Same as note 18.
- 20 Bimala Prosad Mukerji, "History" in A C Gupta edited *Studies in the Bengal Renaissance*, Calcutta: National Council of Education, 1958, p 368.
- 21 Jadunath Sarkar, "The House of Jaipur," cited in Chakravarty, p 258.
- 22 Bikash Chakravarty, *Byahata Sakhya: Rabindranath O Jadunath Sarkar*, Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Press, (1417 BE), Appendix. All subsequent citations from this letter are in the Appendix of the book, which prints a facsimile of the original letter. References to other pages in the book are given in parentheses in the main text.
- 23 Robinson, pp 221–22.
- 24 Same as note 23.
- 25 Same as note 23, p 231.
- 26 The letter, dated 24 April 1921, ends: "This letter of mine is only to let you know that I free myself from the bondage of help and go back to the great Brotherhood of the Tramp, who seem helpless, but who are recruited by God for his own army."
- 27 Jadunath Sarkar, letter dated 31 May 1922.
- 28 Gibson and Rubin, p 285.
- 29 Same as note 28, pp 319–20.

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