

Jamshetji Nusserwanji Tata

Visionary and Architect of India of the Future



Birth of a Great Nation Builder

Nearly one hundred years ago, a magnificent edifice attracted the citizens of Bangalore rising its majestic form on the highest part of the city. From a distance it appeared in the shape of a lighted candle, the people of the city called it the 'Tata Institute', and looked at it with awe tinged with reverence.

The story of how this Institute came into existence and the life and achievements of the man who struggled to make it a reality should be part of the education of every student of science. India has produced many great men in its long history. Among them Jamshetji Nusserwanji Tata, the founder of the Institute, stands alone, dignified and unapproachable. Born at a time when India was a colony of the British, the primary occupation of the rulers of those days was the preservation of law and order and more importantly, the collection of revenue. No one gave any thought to the development of the country or to improving the standard of living of the poor. Against this background of neglect and oppression must be viewed the struggles of a lad born in a poor Parsi family in a tiny hamlet near the port city of Surat in Gujarat.

One Man Planning Commission

In the discouraging environment in which Jamshetji grew, he was instinctively aware of the role he has to play in the advancement of the country. He came to Mumbai as a boy of fourteen, had his education at the Elephinston College, and soon took to business. He had a knack for accumulating wealth and very soon became the owner of several Textile Mills in Mumbai and Nagpur. He felt the day of independence was not far off and started preparing plans for making the

country ready to take up the new responsibilities which would follow. The building of independent India would need administrators, scientists and social workers to attend to a variety of problems that would surely arise. The creation of an Institute which could train men of outstanding ability became an obsession and, even from those early days, he decided to earmark a good part of his earnings for that purpose. His mind was wide-ranging and did not stop at the idea of building an Institute of research. He was aware that India had no infrastructure and would be needing vast quantities of iron and steel to build a network of railways, bridges and roads. Simultaneously, he initiated steps to put up a steel plant, he spotted and enlisted the cooperation of Pramatha Nath Bose, a competent geologist to locate mines capable of producing the raw materials required. His mind did not stop at initiating these gigantic projects but also envisaged the production of electrical energy, another scheme which caught his fancy. He dreamt of harnessing the rainwater running waste down the steep slopes of the *Sahyadri* and make use of it to produce electric power badly needed for the fast developing industrial city of Mumbai. In all these ways he functioned as a 'one man planning commission' and initiated action without the active support from the colonial administration, which remained passive and indifferent to his efforts.

When we recall those days charged with an atmosphere of inferiority, when even the tallest among us had to bend low under the then prevailing system, the long distances travelled to attain the present status becomes at once apparent. Tata was aware of the poverty and deplorable conditions prevailing, but more than simply pitying the lot of the poor he was fired with the zeal to lift up the best and the most gifted so as to make them of the greatest service to the country. It was Lord Reay, the then Governor of Bombay who in his address to the alumni of the Bombay University, had urged his listeners to select the wisest men in England and India "to establish in this old house of learning real universities which will give a fresh impetus to learning, to research and to criticism which will inspire reverence and impart strength and self-reliance to future generations of our and your countrymen". This exhortation made a deep impression on the mind of the young Jamshetji, who was financially sound, had amassed a good fortune in trading and developing the textile industry and was therefore in a position to respond to the appeal of Lord Reay.

Letter to Swami Vivekananda

At about this time, Jamshetji was in Yokohama, Japan, to help his trading interests and it so happened that his fellow traveller was no less a person than Swami Vivekananda, who was on his way to Chicago to attend the Parliament of Religions. Jamshetji was then 54 years of age with an established reputation while Swami Vivekananda was only 30 year old sanyasi yet unknown to the world. What attracted the two visionaries can only be guessed, but the words of Swami Vivekananda obviously made a deep impression on Jamshetji for later he wrote to the Swami outlining his proposal for the creation of a research Institute. This letter is a historical document giving the background history for the creation of an Institute of learning and a glimpse of the concepts entertained by the duo of what it should be.

halls for men dominated by the spirit
where they should live with ordinary
decency & devote their lives to the
cultivation of sciences - natural
& humanistic. I am of opinion that
if such a crusade in favour of an
asceticism of this kind were under-
taken by a competent leader it would
greatly help asceticism, science &
the good name of our common
country. I know not who would make
a more fitting general of such a
campaign than Vivekananda. Do
you think you would care to apply
yourself to this mission of galvanizing
into life our ancient traditions in this
respect? Perhaps you had better



RECEIVED

JAMSHETJI

Sept 28, 1898

Dear Swami Vivekananda,

I trust that you remember
me as a fellow-traveller on your
voyage from Japan to Chicago. I very
much recall at the moment your
views on the growth of the ascetic
spirit in India & the duty, not of
destroying but of diverting it into
useful channels.

I recall those ideas in connection
with my scheme of a Research
Institute for India of which you have
doubtless heard or read. It seems
to me that no better use can be made
of the ascetic spirit than the establishment
of monasteries or residential

"Dear Swami Vivekananda,

Sept 28, 1898

I trust you remember me as a fellow traveller on your voyage from Japan to Chicago. I very much recall at the moment your views on the growth of the ascetic spirit in India and the duty, not of destroying but of diverting it into useful channels.

I recall those ideas in connection with my Scheme of Research Institute of Science for India of which you have doubtless heard or read. It seems to me that no better use can be made of the ascetic spirit than the establishment of Monasteries or residential halls for men dominated by this spirit, where they should live with ordinary decency and devote their lives to the cultivation of sciences - natural and humanistic. I am of the opinion that if such a crusade in favour of an asceticism of this kind were undertaken by a competent leader, it would greatly help asceticism, science and the good name of our common country; and I know not who would make a more fitting general of such a campaign than Vivekananda. Do you think, you would care to apply yourself to this mission of galvanizing into life our ancient traditions in this respect? Perhaps you had better begin with a fiery pamphlet rousing our people in this matter. I should cheerfully defray all the expenses of publication.

Whether Swami Vivekananda replied to his letter or communicated with Jamshetji in any other way is not known, but the letter gives us an idea of the type of institution Jamshetji was contemplating. It is obvious that Jamshetji was deeply impressed with the ideals of the Swami and the eloquent and forceful way in which he put them across.

Burjorji Jamaspji Padshah (1864-1941)

Here I should pause and say something about another remarkable person – Burjorji Jamaspji Padshah (1864-1941) who was destined to play an important role in giving a permanent shape to the pet proposal of Jamshetji. Burjorji was a ward and trusted assistant of Jamshetji. He was entrusted with the task of undertaking a world tour, visit all the famous institutions of higher learning in Britain, Germany and America and to draft a working plan for the establishment of an Institute of learning which Jamshetji had decided to establish and for which he had earmarked Rs. 30 lakhs (a large sum in those days) worth of property. A scheme was drawn up and sent to the Government of India in 1898. Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India, while outwardly acknowledging Tata's generosity, developed an aversion to the proposal from the beginning and failed to support it wholeheartedly. Later, through the persistent efforts of Burjorji Padshah and the assistance of Sister Nivedita, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, a tentative approval was forced out of the Government of India and a committee formed to work out details.

Selection of Bangalore as Venue

The examination of the details of the proposal was a long-drawn affair and the opinion of Sir William Ramsay was invited. After touring the whole of India, Ramsay recommended Bangalore as the possible site for the location of the Institute. There were further delays in the choice of the first Director and the subjects to be included. Tata weary at the delay and interminable negotiations, was on the point of giving up the project, but Burjorji Padshah, who had worked on the proposal on behalf of his master, was more disappointed and gave vent to his feelings.

"I have spoken at length and with candour; because I think that it is essential that Mr Tata's thoughts should be understood. Signs are not wanting that if Mr. Tata should stand aside today, the whole of his programme and more (though, perhaps, not always with his insight) would still be carried out. That is indeed a fresh reason for caution. An institute at Bangalore, step-mothered by Government, may languish for want of funds, students, appliances, and professors, if all are seduced from it by institutions of the same kind handsomely planted everywhere. Mr. Tata's committee will have to take care that in the present perturbation about university reforms, the institute is not started while all the work that it is proposed to do is handed over to others with liberal resources.

One has to admire the candour of Padshah, who stood up to Lord Curzon puffed up with his own ego coupled with the insolence of power at being the Viceroy of India. The tone of Padshah's letter further incensed Curzon and delayed processing of Tata's proposal.

In the meanwhile the Government of Mysore, represented by two of the noblest Dewans of the State, K. Seshadri Iyer and M. Visweswaraya, without any persuasion had come forward to grant an extent of 300 acres of prime land and promised also a recurring annual grant. This generous gesture tipped the scale in favour of Bangalore being selected for the location of this prestigious Institute. The negotiations went on and on and it was nearly eighteen years after the first proposal was mooted that the project at last began to take shape. Jamshetji, however, did not live to see his project become a reality as he passed away in May 1904.

Growth of the Institute

The Institute has grown beyond all recognition, especially in recent years, there being hardly any field of science, engineering and technology which it has not extended. Formerly the Institute was an island of peace, away from the din and dust of the city but Bangalore has since grown in a haphazard way and engulfed the Institute on all sides. Numerous structures have also come up



within the Institute premises to satisfy the claims of the new departments. Luxuriant vegetation which had given the Institute an aspect of an *ashram* in the earlier years does not exist any longer.

India has had a culture extending to more than five thousand years and had excelled in arts, literature, astronomy, medicine, mining and metallurgy. The knowledge gathered about the natural resource of the land was extraordinary, for they had traced the source of almost all the metalliferous minerals and had developed the skill for extracting from their ores the metals which they required.

Their knowledge about the flora and fauna and their medicinal properties was equally extraordinary. It is rather unfortunate that in our craze to imitate the western model of development based on might is right, material comfort, consumerism, and world permeated with hatred and severe competition, the Indian ideal of simple living and high thinking, life of contentment, compassion to all living beings, tolerance, humility and service to others failed to receive any consideration. There is no concerted effort at tracing the history of India's scientific tradition.

The founder of the Institute, Jamshetji Tata, as can be seen from his letter addressed to Swami Vivekananda and also while formulating his first proposal to the Government of India had clearly expressed his desire that *the Institute should represent the best of Indian culture and that its scholars be better informed and more truly Indian citizens who will play a dominant role in making the great but impoverished country of ours a better place to live in*. The scientists who pass out of the Institute should give a thought to the ideals cherished by its founder.

The great object of the British Government was the promotion of European literature and science and that funds available for education was henceforth employed in imparting it to the native population knowledge of English literature and science. The triumph of their own civilization made them blind to the existence of other ways and intolerant of developing native science as of no consequence and scarping it out of existence.

What did India represent in the past? What gave her the strength then? How did she lose her old strength? Does she represent anything vital now? India could not have continued a cultured existence for thousands of years, if she had not proved something very vital and enduring. What was this something? What was the secret of her strength? Where did it come from? Questions like these bothered intellectuals like Nehru and Jamshetji. They could find no answer but there is no Institute in the whole of India where attempts are made to find answers to these questions?

In the next hundred years of development of the Institute may we hope sufficient emphasis will be given to research on the history of Indian scientific tradition, so that the Indian model could also be placed by the side of the Western model to enable humanity to choose which system would serve mankind better and save it from destruction. The Western model is of recent date compared to the Indian model which had been in operation for thousands of years and had given to the world some of the greatest men and wisest philosophical thought aimed at peaceful coexistence as against terror and destruction to which modern science appears to be leading us despite the many services rendered to humanity.

In the pantheon of great men who have lifted mankind to a higher place, the name of Jamshetji will occupy an honoured place. We have no doubt that the spirit which spurred him to action will continue to lead India and make the Indian scientist hold his head high and looked up to for providing guidance to a mad world shivering in terror in spite of the wealth and comfort it has generated for mankind.

Email: kkitts@gmail.com

B.P. RADHAKRISHNA