

SHANTINIKETAN AND TAGORE'S IDEAS ON EDUCATION

Smita Thakare
Shantiketana International School,
Amravati, Maharashtra

Shantiniketan, a veritable abode of peace and tranquility, is famous for the world renowned Visva Bharati University founded by Rabindranath Tagore in 1921. The university has a unique setting for imparting education, with classes held in the open. It was established by Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, and later expanded by his son Rabindranath Tagore whose vision became what is now a university town with the creation of Visva-Bharati. On 22nd December 1901, Rabindranath Tagore established his school at Santiniketan with five students (including his eldest son) and an equal number of teachers. He originally named it Brahmacharya Ashram in the tradition of ancient forest hermitages.

At Santiniketan the environment is always present in one's consciousness. It becomes a part of one's being here, more than anywhere else, which is why it grows on you and having lived here once it is difficult to forget. The Santiniketan environment has changed, grown and evolve with its community.

Santiniketan is situated at an elevation of 200 feet above sea-level giving it a slight bulge in an otherwise flat landscape. The ground slopes gradually to 100 feet above sea-level near the Ajay river about 3 miles to the south and the Kopai stream some 2 miles to the north. The southern boundary of Santiniketan merges into a vast plain of rice fields. On its northern fringes were the khoai lands with deeply indented gullies caused by erosion over denuded land. The District Gazetteer of Birbhum records that in pre-British days, Birbhum had an extensive forest cover. Progressive denudation of forests played havoc with the porous laterite soil. During the hot months, fierce dust storms scattered the loose soil far and wide. During the rains heavy erosion took place as after every downpour water rushed through undulating land creating gullies and gorges in its relentless march.

Established in 1863 with the aim of helping education go beyond the confines of the classroom, Santiniketan grew into the Visva Bharati University in 1921, attracting some of the most creative minds in the country. He developed a curriculum that was a unique blend of art, human values and cultural interchange.

Shantiniketan (Sanskrit: "The Abode of Peace") began as Shantiniketan Ashram, a meditation centre founded and endowed in 1863 by Maharishi Debendranath, the father of the world-famous Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. Instead of teaching facts, Tagore believed in experiential learning and active engagement of the student with the world. This was an aim to build oneness amongst them, to educate them on international understanding and universal brotherhood.

The University offers courses in humanities, social science, science, fine arts, music, performing arts, education, agricultural science, and rural reconstruction. Its art college, Kala Bhavan, is widely considered to be one of the best art colleges in the world.

The word Shantiniketan means “the abode of peace”. It was here that Rabindranath Tagore gave a practical shape to his educational ideas. There is an atmosphere of joy and freedom, love and peace, sympathy and nobleness of spirit, simple living and high thinking.

AIMS OF TAGORE SHANTINIKETAN SCHOOL:

- **Homely Atmosphere-** To provide to the students a homely atmosphere in the school.
- **Spiritual Atmosphere-** To provide an atmosphere in the school which is pervaded by spiritual greatness as found in the ancient Hindu Ashrams of the Gurus.
- **Ancient Indian Culture-** To acquaint the students with ancient Indian culture and traditions.
- **Simple Living-** To emphasize the principle of simple living and high thinking.
- **Maximum Freedom-** To provide maximum freedom of activity to children and healthy community life.
- **Contact with nature-** To allow the students to come in contact with nature and get education from it.

With all these basic purposes, Shantiniketan functions like an Ashram with all the simplicity, tranquillity and calm atmosphere. It represents a community where people live in collaboration and strive commonly for the pursuit of excellence.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF TAGORE SHANTINIKETAN SCHOOL:

- **Homely Atmosphere-** All the students lead a healthy family life. There are no distinctions of caste, colour or creed. Simple and cheap food is cooked and served in common by the students. Most of the daily services are done by the pupils themselves.
- **Spiritual and religious atmosphere-** The student gets up at **5 a.m.** in the morning. They start their day with a prayer. They move around the tree groves praying to God- “Thou art our Father”. They end their prayer in the same way. There is an intimate relationship between the teacher and the taught. They have great respect for their teachers who try to maintain a highly spiritual atmosphere in the campus.
- **Natural Setting-** The school is situated in a natural setting. There are open fields, clear blue sky and tree groves. Students come in direct contact with nature while studying. This leads to the spiritual elevations of the pupils.
- **Organization of Classes-** The classes are organized under huge shady trees. There is a stone sofa of semi-circular shape on which the pupils sit. The classes begin at **6:30 a.m.** in the morning with the chirping of birds. Breakfast is at about **8:30 a.m.** The regular classes are over by noon. Evenings are devoted to subjects like dancing, music, physical training, and games etc. Social education classes are also organized at nights.
- **Self-government-** It is a self-sufficient and self-governing republic. Students satisfy most of the wants themselves. They have their own dairy farm, post office and hospital. They themselves organize the activities of these bodies.
- **Intimate Contact-** There is intimate personal contact between the teacher and the taught. As the limited number of students is admitted everybody comes into intimate contact with his fellows.
- **Punishment-** Those pupils who create mischief are generally punished in a family spirit. Those who admit their faults are pardoned. Punishments are generally proposed by courts constituted of students. Students Courts and Students Judges decide the punishment.

It was always the objective in Santiniketan that learning would be a part of life's natural growth. The first step towards this objective was to establish in the child a sense of oneness with nature. A child has to be aware of his surroundings - the trees, birds and animals around him. The mind is deprived if one is indifferent to the world outside. Rabindranath said we concentrate on learning from books and neglect the knowledge that is freely available on all sides.

From the beginning, he wanted his students to be aware of their environment, be in communication with it, probe it, make experiments and collect data and specimens. And to guide them he wanted teachers who could go beyond book-learning, who were seekers themselves and who would find joy in the process of learning. In this context one might mention Tejeschandra Sen, who along with Jagadananda Roy, was one of the pioneering teachers of Nature Study in India. They were able to instill in children a love for and curiosity about the natural world. Lord Haldane, visiting Santiniketan in 1954 was much impressed with Tejeschandra's method of teaching.

However, Santiniketan today is a veritable botanists' paradise. Plants, trees, creepers and orchids from various parts of India and abroad have been made to flourish in this once semi-desert. Rabindranath himself took a deep interest in planting trees. He introduced the Vriksharopana, or tree-planting ceremony in 1928, popularising the concept. His son, Rathindranath, was a horticulturist by training and introduced a number of new trees and plants into Santiniketan. Fortunately, the Santiniketan community in general shares this interest in trees and gardening. The seasons are clearly marked in Santiniketan; one knows the end of one season and the beginning of the other with the sights and smell of blossoms in bloom.

The same joyous atmosphere is evident and the children look as happy and free as ever. Classes even to this day are held under the trees. The first day of rains is still celebrated with an outing, barefoot and sans umbrellas. The spirit of Rabindranath lives on in Santiniketan; one needs to be conscious of it and tread gently, lest one should disturb it.