

## In the Poet's Schools Where Environment is Another Entity of Education: A Case Study

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**ABSTRACT** Globally, awareness programs for environmental conservation and energy preservation involve active individual participation. Yet the adoption of sustainable lifestyles remains limited. In India, educational institutions play a significant role in fostering environmental awareness through campaigns, tree planting, and waste management programs. Environmental education, rooted in the naturalism philosophy and India's historical tradition of learning in natural settings, is often offered as a separate subject. The *Gurukul* system, with modern adaptations, strives to maintain a balance between traditional and contemporary education, preserving the symbiotic relationship between the environment and education. Over a century ago, Rabindranath Tagore established schools at *Santiniketan* and *Sriniketan*, promoting this holistic approach instead of a standalone environmental education subject. This case study explores students' sustainable practices in an Ashram environment, highlighting their contributions to nature and society. In these schools, the environment is not just a backdrop but an integral part of education and culture, reflecting Tagore's twin dreams and creating a unique and inspiring educational experience.

### INTRODUCTION

The 21<sup>st</sup> century world faces significant environmental challenges, including globalisation, depletion of underground water sources, oxygen scarcity, pollution, and related diseases. Increased awareness has led to global environmental awareness programs and efforts to conserve energy and natural resources. The consequences of destructive activities like deforestation and excessive groundwater use are now well-known. Studies indicate a positive correlation between a low level of education and awareness leading to deforestation and degradation of nature (Godoy et al. 1997; Sudhakar Reddy et al. 2015). Despite recognition, there remains a gap between awareness and action. While many participate in environmental preservation campaigns, a broader shift toward adopting sustainable livelihoods is essential to address pressing challenges like atmospheric poisons, ozone layer holes, and diminishing supplies of non-renewable resources (Braubach et al. 2017; Colding et al. 2020).

To foster environmental awareness, starting from childhood is crucial, with educational institutions and families serving as pivotal platforms. Recognising students as future custodians, efforts must begin in early stages of life. The Kothari Com-

mission's (1964-1966) wisdom, stating "The destiny of India is being shaped in her classrooms", is particularly relevant (Kothari 1966). Planting seeds of environmental awareness in a child's foundational development is imperative (Stapp 1969; Yang 2013). A positive sign is the widespread integration of sustainable practices into the curriculum of almost all schools in India. Initiatives like campaigns, tree plantations, and waste management programs actively involve students in learning environmental responsibility. Many educational institutions across different boards in India offer dedicated segments for environmental education, either as an elective or a compulsory component in senior secondary courses, underlining its significance with marks allocated in final examinations.

Theoretical aspects of environmental education influence students' understanding of environmental issues (Vieira et al. 2022), and practical components offer hands-on experiences in embracing sustainable lifestyles and actively engaging in environmental protection efforts (Yli-Panula et al. 2022). The *Gurukul* system, rooted in studying amidst nature, has been a heritage gradually lost in modernisation's waves. Civilisation's progress led to the mechanisation of education (Stapp 1969), confining it within four walls in the colonial edu-

education system. However, the culture of the *Gurukul* system, with modernised improvisations, still persists to prepare learners for the contemporary world. Over a century ago, Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore established *Shantiniketan* and *Sriniketan* schools in India

### Background of the Poet's Schools

Tagore strongly opposed education within four walls, likening schools to the prison house of Andaman. Disliking the claustrophobic atmosphere, he studied at home, envisioning a barrier-free, monotony-free, and nature-friendly teaching-learning environment for the next generation. Critical of the colonial education system, which produced clerks for the British Empire, Tagore aimed to create an environment where teachers and students immersed in open nature could impart liberating knowledge (Mandal 2021). In 1901, he established an institution - *Brahmacharyashrama*, later renamed *Patha-Bhavana*, with this noble aim, and in 1924, set up another institution named *Shiksha-Satra*. These schools run under the curriculum of the *Visva-Bharati* Board.

Tagore pioneered nature-centric learning in both schools, emphasising the importance of children experiencing nature directly (Sinha 2019). He believed in the joyous connection between education and joy, advocating for learning in the open sky and the lap of nature to free students from artificial constraints (Chattopadhyay 2019). Tagore's educational philosophy aimed at studying nature in its true form, viewing nature as the ultimate teacher for achieving a holistic life (Mukherjee and Singh 2022). He saw nature as a source of energy and love, fostering the holistic development of both body and soul (Datta 1998). Tagore rejected the notion that man-made tools were essential for optimal learning, trusting that learners, when faced with limitations, would tap into their creative faculties and exhibit responsibility.

### Objectives of the Case Study

The objectives of the case study are to:

1. Investigate schools where the environment is seamlessly integrated into teaching-learning activities, curriculum, and the education system, surpassing conventional environmental education.

2. Explore the intrinsic nature of environmental activities in education and their contribution to community well-being.
3. Understand the symbiotic relationship between the environment and education by examining learners' sustainable practices in *Visva-Bharati* schools.
4. Observe learners' aesthetic and philanthropic activities to discern their impact on nurturing nature and the surrounding society.

### METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative approach, employing observational techniques to evaluate environmental practices and festivals. Data collection includes personal interviews with 15 teachers in each of the two schools, using semi-structured interview schedules. Additionally, focus group interviews were conducted with 10 students in each school, utilising semi-structured schedules developed by the researchers. Interview questions aimed to probe the types of environmental practices in the schools and the level of student and teacher engagement in these programs. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Interview Inferences

Researchers conducted interviews with students and teachers, uncovering insights into sustainable practices that benefit both the environment and the local community. Responses of teachers' interviews have been summarised in Table 1.

It is observed that teachers have integrated these practices into their subjects and the school curriculum, emphasising the role of seasonal festivals, donation collections, *Gram Paridarshan* (village visit), and fairs in promoting environmental, aesthetic, and philanthropic activities among students. The teachers' assertions, linking these activities to their subjects, underscore the significance of hands-on learning. Such practices have also been identified as crucial factors in nurturing environmental sustainability (Ardoin et al. 2017; Tidball and Krasny 2010).

Students expressed a strong interest in nature-related literature, particularly praising a story titled 'The Man Who Loves Trees'. They appreciated

**Table 1: Observation and opinion of the teachers**

<i>Subject teacher</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Name of the school</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
Bengali	Female	<i>Patha-Bhavana</i>	<p>During Gram Paridarshan (Village Visit), students comprehend challenges faced by villagers and proactively seek solutions, establishing connections between these societal issues and their academic curriculum.</p> <p>They exhibit a heightened sensitivity toward living creatures, fostering deep respect for all forms of life from an early age. As an illustration, students actively take on the responsibility of caring for puppies scattered throughout the Ashram premises</p> <p>They proactively decorate stages, showcasing their creativity by embellishing even the dust bins.</p>
	Male	<i>Siksha-Satra</i>	In comprehension and creative writing exercises, students encounter nature-inspired themes like 'Joy of a Rainy Day,' 'Clouds Adorning the Sky,' and 'My Heart Dances Today like a Peacock.' This cultivates a connection between their imagination and the natural world.
English	Female	<i>Patha-Bhavana</i>	<p>In creative writing assignments, students explore nature-oriented themes, diving into topics like seasonal changes, the vibrant hues of Palash flowers, the onset of spring, and the poetic imagery of shedding leaves</p> <p>They exhibit a strong sense of care, extending their compassion not only to others but also to the environment.</p>
Japanese	Male	<i>Patha-Bhavana</i>	During community engagement programmes, they raise awareness among people about the Japanese ecological practices, waste management, and sanitation systems.
Geography	Male	<i>Patha-Bhavana</i>	<p>In my class, students actively discuss environmental issues, exploring topics like the greenhouse effect, deforestation, and other relevant ecological concerns.</p> <p>During <i>Gram Paridarshan</i>, they engage in cleanliness drives, tree plantations, and the cultivation of kitchen gardens, actively contributing to both academic knowledge and the development of their environmental responsibility.</p> <p>In the National Service Scheme (NSS), they contribute significantly to both environmental initiatives and societal welfare.</p>
	Female	<i>Siksha-Satra</i>	<p>Participating in activities like <i>Gram Paridarshan</i>, social welfare initiatives, tree plantation, cleanliness drives, etc., not only contributes to their overall development but also enhances their understanding and knowledge in various subjects.</p> <p>I regularly organize outdoor excursions for the students to provide direct exposure to diverse geological features, trees, soils, and other natural elements.</p>
Food & Nutrition	Female	<i>Patha-Bhavana</i>	<p>The students embellish their practical notebooks creatively, incorporating natural elements such as lentils, cumin, poppy seeds, and more.</p> <p>In the community engagement program, students conduct door-to-door visits in nearby villages, assessing weights and creating personalized diet charts. They also actively raise awareness about disease prevention and advocate for safe pregnancies through proper diet implementation. This multifaceted approach is seamlessly integrated into their curriculum.</p>
Painting	Female	<i>Patha-Bhavana</i>	<p>They are assigned to highlight nature-centric themes, delving into topics such as the shedding of leaves and seasonal changes in greater detail.</p> <p>They occasionally host community-connect programs like painting workshops, with themes reflecting the communal life of nearby places, especially neighboring villages. Consequently, their artwork serves as valuable documentation, portraying the social life of the community or area.</p>

**Table 1: Contd...**

<i>Subject teacher</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Name of the school</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
	Male	<i>Siksha-Satra</i>	A painter, by nature, is a highly perceptive and observant individual. In my role as a teacher, I also introduce discussions on both natural and social issues.
Music	Female	<i>Patha-Bhavana</i>	The students actively contribute as artists, showcasing their talents in <i>Ananda Bazar</i> , a fair organized by the students. Their creative works boost sales, with profits directed towards social welfare initiatives. Additionally, they skillfully craft artistic messages on banners for various social activities.
Dance	Male	<i>Patha-Bhavana</i>	Rabindra Sangeet and other musical compositions intricately weave elements of nature, fostering a profound connection between students and the natural world, resonating with the beauty of the environment.
			Various dance forms skilfully incorporate gestures that symbolize elements from nature, imparting valuable lessons inspired by the natural world.

*Source:* Authors' Observations

subject teachers who introduced them to tree illustrations, like the '*Amaltas*' (Cassia fistula, also known as golden shower tree). Cultural festivals celebrating natural changes were unanimously enjoyed. Five female students actively participated in welcoming each season through cultural activities. Two students expressed excitement about National Service Scheme (NSS) involvement, emphasising its impact on school cleanliness and organising camps in Shantiniketan. Students enthusiastically engaged in Gram Paridarshan, outings, picnics, and excursions, deepening their connection with nature. They actively contributed to the community through blood donation, health camps, and cleanliness drives. Sixteen out of 20 students expressed a commitment to future social work, addressing issues like poverty, rural development, animal welfare, and environmental awareness. The students' connection to the environment and society is both direct and indirect through the curriculum of the Visva-Bharati Board. They actively participated in diverse social welfare activities, ranging from road construction in remote areas to the upkeep of school buildings, as well as the distribution of essential items such as blankets, books, and sewing machines.

### Observation Inferences

Researchers conducted interviews and direct observations, finding that in *Patha-Bhavana* and *Shiksha-Satra*, the teaching-learning process unfolds in nature's embrace. Classes often occur out-

doors, fostering a burden-free educational system that enhances joy, enthusiasm, and independent thinking among students. These schools offer a diverse range of optional subjects, including music, painting, dance, and even Japanese, but surprisingly, environmental education is not formally included. The schools prioritise a curriculum emphasising practical learning from nature and society over textbook knowledge, viewing every activity and experience as a valuable lesson. '*Prakriti Path*' (nature study) at the primary level involves collecting natural objects, providing firsthand experience and knowledge. Field trips from primary to class XII break the classroom monotony, reinforcing learning by allowing students to interact closely with nature. Literature classes integrate nature-related topics, fostering a profound bond between students and the natural world.

Students in these schools keenly observe changing seasons, deeply connecting with nature in the ashram environment. The concept of "nature" extends beyond plants, and animals, like cows, dogs, goats, squirrels, and birds freely roam the campus, fostering an affectionate bond with students. The students proactively care for injured animals and birds out of innate empathy, not external prompting.

Seasons are joyfully celebrated with cultural events at these schools. In *Patha-Bhavana*, festivals unfold amid nature, with students adorning stages using collected flowers and leaves. In *Shiksha-Satra*, the open setting allows for wall-free programs. Both schools host literary meetings, *Vigy-*

*an Sabha* (Science Congress), Teachers' Day, and functions in collaboration with the university, enhancing the connection with nature and fostering creativity. The seasonal festival cycle, from '*Barsha Baran*' (welcoming the Bengali New Year) to '*Barsha-Sesh*' (end of the Bengali year), involves various events throughout the year to celebrate and embrace nature, as outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2: Seasons and related celebrations in schools**

Season	Events
Summer	<i>Barsha-Sesh</i> (Ending of the year) and <i>Barsha Baran</i> (welcoming the year)
Rainy Season	<i>Vriksharopan</i> (Tree Plantation), <i>Halakarshan</i> (Ploughing Festival), <i>Barsha-Mangal</i> (Monsoon festival)
Autumn	<i>Sharad-Utsava</i> (Autumn Festival)
Winter	<i>Pousa-Utsava</i> (Pous Festival) and <i>Maghotsava</i> (Magh Festival)
Spring	<i>Vasant-Utsava</i> (Spring Festival)

*Note:* *Pous* and *Magh* correspond to the months in the Hindu calendar, aligning with December-January and January-February, respectively  
*Source:* Authors' Observations

The week-long '*Barsha Mangala*' (Monsoon Festival) celebration includes cultural programs, '*Vriksharopan*' (tree plantation), and '*Halakarshana Utsava*' (ploughing festival) for field preparation. Tree plantation at *Shantiniketan* and the ploughing festival at *Sriniketan* hold agricultural significance during the rainy season. The month-long '*Sharad-Utsava*' (Autumn Festival) showcases student-led drama performances, celebrating autumn before the *Puja* vacation (an Indian festival vacation). These festivities strengthen students' profound connection with changing seasons and the natural world.

**Table 3: Students-run department (*bibhag*) and their activities**

Departments	Activities
<i>Sahitya Bibhag</i> (Literary Department)	Manages ' <i>Sahitya Sabha</i> ' and oversees the editing of literary magazines.
<i>Sasthya Bibhag</i> (Health Department)	Oversees student health and coordinates health camps, while also conducting health awareness programs.
<i>Seva Bibhag</i> (Service Department)	Supervises the collection of donations and ensures their proper utilization.
<i>Krida Bibhag</i> (Sports Department)	Coordinates games and sports activities, overseeing the daily evening games conducted in the ' <i>Ashrama Math</i> ' playground.
<i>Paribesh Bibhag</i> (Environment Department)	Supervises cleanliness drive programs.
<i>Aharjo Bibhag</i> (Food Department)	Manages kitchen-related matters in the hostel.
<i>Sakha Sangha</i> (Library Department)	Students organize and manage the library.

*Source:* Authors' Observations

On *Mahalaya eve*, students actively participate in the '*Ananda Bazar*' fair, contributing their money for initial investments. Profits from the fair, channelled into a welfare fund, benefit nearby villages, instilling the concept of sustainable development in learners. Eco-friendly materials, often recycled or waste items, are used for handicrafts, transforming into attractive products. This approach teaches students about sustainable practices and involves them in philanthropic activities from a young age. The schools embrace self-governance through various student-run departments, each assigned specific activities, as detailed in Table 3.

In commitment to community service, students and teachers engage in '*Dan Sangraha*' (donation collection) for neighbouring villages, overseen by the '*Seva Bibhag*' (Service Department). The assistance may involve constructing essential facilities, addressing unique village needs through '*Gram Paridarshan*' (village exploration), and organising camps to tackle identified issues. The '*Paribesh Bibhag*' (Environment Department) leads cleanliness drives, caring for plants, and observing '*Gandhi Punyaho*' for a clean and eco-friendly environment. The symbiotic relationship between students and the environment is evident in rituals like the '*Barsha Mangala*' or tree plantation ceremony, emphasising mutual love, care, and respect. Students' connection with nature fosters unity and responsibility, extending to animals like cows, dogs, goats and squirrels.

The pedagogical approach adopted by the schools in this case study exemplifies practices that are strongly supported by a broad range of academic research (Ardoin et al. 2015; Ladwig 2010; Neurohr et al. 2024; Reffhaug and Lysgaard 2024;

Schusler et al. 2009; West 2015). Kals et al. (1999) emphasized the critical role of nature as a significant influencing factor, particularly in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of young people. This is reinforced by research demonstrating that direct experiences in nature significantly influence pro-environmental behavior (Otto et al. 2021; Richardson et al. 2020), underscoring the necessity of integrating such experiences into environmental education (Stevenson et al. 2013; Wells and Lekies 2006).

The schools affiliated with Visva-Bharati, founded by Rabindranath Tagore, have long adhered to these philosophies, which have been substantiated by numerous studies. Many educators and researchers have highlighted the academic and environmental benefits of incorporating environmental education into the curriculum for students from kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) (Ardoin et al. 2017; Busch 2015; Chawla and Cushing 2007). The educational model practiced in these schools, where the environment is an active participant in the learning process, not only aligns with but also validates contemporary research findings. This approach fosters a deep connection with nature and promotes sustainable practices among students, contributing to both their academic growth and their development as environmentally conscious citizens.

### CONCLUSION

Nature serves as the nurturer of human civilization, a concept emphasised by various summits, commissions, NGOs, and the National Education Policy of 2020. However, students at *Patha-Bhavana* and *Shiksha-Satra* uniquely experience daily immersion in the natural world, internalising the rhythms of nature. For them, the environment is not a separate subject but an integral part of life. These students genuinely care about the well-being of people and animals, embracing the concept of *Tapovan* as an extended family. The motto of Visva-Bharati, '*Where the whole world meets in a single nest*', is manifested through community service and sustainable activities, aligning with Tagore's vision for a planetary imagined community. In these schools, the environment is not just a backdrop but an integral part of education and culture, reflecting Tagore's twin dreams and creating a unique and inspiring educational experience.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Educational institutions worldwide should contemplate the integration of nature-based immersion programs into their curricula, following the example set by *Patha-Bhavana* and *Shiksha-Satra*. This approach, emphasising daily interaction with the natural world, has the potential to deepen students' connection to the environment and foster a heightened understanding of ecological rhythms. The success of the '*Tapovan*' concept, where students perceive the environment as an extended family, suggests the importance of instilling empathy and care for nature. Schools are encouraged to actively promote a sense of responsibility towards environmental well-being, cultivating a mindset where students see themselves as stewards of the planet.

Incorporating community service and sustainable activities, mirroring the practices at Visva-Bharati, can prove valuable additions to educational programs globally. This aligns seamlessly with Rabindranath Tagore's vision of a planetary imagined community, promoting a sense of global citizenship and responsibility for the collective well-being of humanity and the environment.

### APPENDIX

#### *Pous and Magh Mela*

The '*Pous Festival*' commemorates Maharshi Devendranath Tagore's conversion to the Brahmo religion and the founding of Brahma Mandir at Santiniketan. Despite the COVID pandemic's suspension of *Poush Mela* ('=or fair'), students, teachers, staff, and Ashramites gather to celebrate through cultural events and prayers. *Maghotsava*, the primary Brahmo festival, features cultural festivities, prayers, and the *Magh Mela* fair showcasing agricultural products and local handicrafts. *Vasant Utsava*, the Spring festival, welcomes spring with vibrant songs, dances, and dance-dramas inspired by the season, accompanied by colourful powders made from flower petals.

#### *Mahalaya*

*Mahalaya* is a Hindu festival preceding *Durga Puja*, but the associated fair, *Ananda Bazar*, is non-religious. Organised entirely by students, they independently set up and decorate stalls, showcas-

ing their creativity and independence. Teachers are present to offer assistance, but the students take the lead in the major activities

### **Gandhi Punyaho**

Gandhi Punyaho denotes celebration of Gandhiji's first visit to Santiniketan

### **Tapovan**

Tapovan means ancient Indian Forest where Gurukuls used to be situated

### **Gurukul**

A gurukul is a traditional school in India with students (*shishya*) living near their guru, often in the same dwelling, as a sort of family.

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