

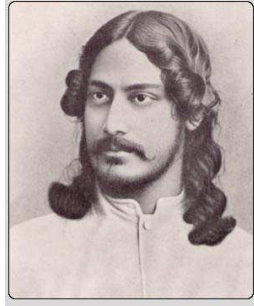
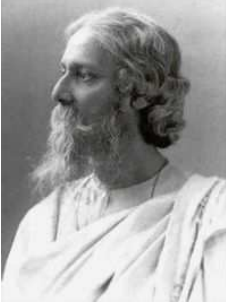
## **Living and Learning in Harmony with Nature - Dr. Jharna Chatterjee**



It was a few minutes past 4 A.M. Half-asleep, I was half-listening to the CBC radio's overnight broadcast from Bonn, Germany, when a news item caught my attention and woke me up: German schools have started "Forest kindergartens". The program works like this: Completely prepared for outdoor activities, 3 to 7 year-old children learn to live with and to appreciate nature through playing in every possible weather condition with whatever toys Mother Nature might provide them with – leaves, twigs, rocks and pebbles, opportunity to climb trees or jump over fallen trees and to frolic in puddles and shallow creeks. This trend was said to become so popular with parents and children alike that there are reported to be at least 300 such kindergarten classes in Germany today. Also, other kindergarten schools have started introducing 'forest days or weeks' in their curriculum. Parents say that this experience makes their children healthier, happier, more physically fit, more creative, imaginative and less aggressive – as opposed to being obese and suffering from 'attention deficit syndrome' due to lack of physical activity and long hours of watching television. This news item brought to my mind a similar concept – implemented many years ago in another part of the world.

In the early 1860's, a teenage boy from a highly educated, elite family of Kolkata, India dropped out of formal schooling. He felt sad and imprisoned in the enclosed classroom, could not concentrate and learn the lessons following the traditional curriculum and teaching methods. In his own words, "With their walls like menacing watchmen, the school rooms seemed heartless– I did not feel at home at all. [The school] was like a large box with small compartments. There was no decoration or picture or color – no effort to attract children's minds. The idea that children might also have likes and dislikes was completely banished from these premises. So the moment I stepped beyond the gate into the school compound, I used to feel depressed. My relationship with schools, therefore, for ever was one of escape." Fortunately for him, his father understood his problem and arranged for private tutors to instruct him in all academic subjects, classical music as well as wrestling for his physical fitness at home. This little boy grew up to be a Nobel Laureate in literature, India's first, and we, the Bengalis boast of him as our 'Gurudev' (the teacher), the pioneering educator of our culture and literature. He is no other than Rabindranath Tagore. His father, Maharshi (means the great sage) Debendranath himself instructed him in Indian philosophy including Vedanta (or Upanishad), Sanskrit, English and Astronomy during the three months Rabindranath once stayed in the Himalayas with him. Sometimes Debendranath also took his youngest son with him to Bolpur, 213 km away from Kolkata, where he had founded a small 'ashram' or hermitage for his meditation. Thus, the boy Rabindranath had formed a lasting relationship with nature from his early childhood, and we can assume that this bond only grew stronger as he freely roamed in and around the woods and explored the small streams and reddish, rocky meadows of Bolpur. Rabindranath spent a few years in England as a young adult to study law, but did not complete the program before returning to India.

Daniel Schugurensky\* wrote: "On 1901, with the dawn of the century, a small but influential educational development took place at Bolpur, outside the city of Calcutta. That year, the poet, novelist, painter, composer, social reformer and educator Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) created his own school, the Santiniketan, as a protest against the existing system of education in India at that time. The school attempted at combining Western and Indian philosophies of education, and eventually became a university in 1921."



Rabindranath Tagore at two different ages

In 1921 Rabindranath converted his father's 'ashram' into an open-air school that became "Viswa-Bharati" (means universal learning) located in Shanti Niketan (means Abode of Peace), a school where under his sage guidance, education strived to create a bond between knowledge and the nature, and also a bond between Indian and international values. Rabindranath said, "When I founded this school in Shanti Niketan, I myself didn't have too much to give to the boys. But I wanted their minds to be touched by the morning light, the green meadows and the forest, the trees of this place. The young hearts need to taste the joy of Nature's company. The lives of children blossom automatically through their enjoyment of the universe, of the sunrise and the sunset. I wanted them to feel that the earth is rearing them in her bosom like a mother. They needed to be freed from the urban, inert prison of brick, stones and wood where they were growing up. With this objective, I founded this center of learning here in this wide space that lies in the lap of light and sky. I wished that the forest and the birds of Shanti Niketan would take the responsibility of educating them. ... I didn't have the audacity to teach the boys [later, girls as well] any 'book-based knowledge'. But from my early childhood I was impressed with the messages of Mother Nature, I felt close to her and I knew how much more valuable this was in terms of providing me with energy and inspiration."

Tagore even utilized funds from selling his wife's jewelry, and then from his Nobel Prize, the royalty from his own writings, and all other contributions he could gather from his speeches throughout the world towards realizing this vision into actuality. Even today, classes are held under shade-trees; students still celebrate Basanta Utsov (the spring festival), Varsha-Mangal (the monsoon festival), Sharod Utsov (the autumn festival), Poush-mela (the winter get-together) and Vriksha-ropon (tree-planting) through colorful dances and songs within the university compound, in and around the trees. He initiated a festival of "Tree-planting" (Vriksha-ropon), as early as in 1928 - decades ahead of 'green peace' – as a remedy for deforestation! He also re-initiated a festival of 'Rakhi-Bandhan' (tying a bond of friendship) to encourage harmony among people regardless of race, religion, gender and language. In spite of his patriotism, he did not believe in narrow nationalism, vehemently opposed militarism and throughout his life expressed his ideals of self-respect and multi-cultural learning.

Viswa-Bharati University is renowned for the education of fine arts - music, dance, drama, sculpture, painting etc., but it has the following buildings in its campus that offer a wide range of courses: Cheena or China Bhavan houses the Chinese Faculty; and Hindi Bhavan is for learning Hindi; Kala Bhavan is the College of Fine Arts and Crafts; it also has a museum that displays sculptures, frescoes, murals and a library of art books; Patha Bhavan is a secondary school, modeled after the 'Brahmacharya Ashram' of ancient Vedic tradition; Sangeet Bhavan is the College of Dance and Music. Vidya Bhavan is the College of Humanities; Siksha-Bhavan is the College of Science and Vinaya Bhavan is the Teacher's Training College. Shri Niketan is a Center for Rural Service and Studies, where crafts of various types such as traditional

embroidery, leather work, batik painting are taught. There is also a college of Agriculture named Palli Siksha Sadan in Shri Niketan.



Left: Patha Bhavan under the haze of midday sun, seen through the Mango grove where (weather permitting) open-air classes are held for Secondary School students. Right: 'Shal bithi' or the row of 'Shal' trees, a favorite path for Rabindranath to take a stroll in the evening and discuss a variety of issues with his friends – photos by author

In the context of educating his own son, Rabindranath commented, "The potted, artificially irrigated plants do not learn to dig their roots deep into the earth and to independently nourish themselves. It's the same with people. The lesson Nature demands from us is to utilize our bodies fully, but it is neglected in the 'so-called' gentle, urban lifestyle. I regret this lack of learning in my own life even today."



Chhatim-tala



Prayer Hall – photos by author

Chhatimtala is the place where Maharshi Devendranath, Rabindranath's father, used to meditate. Prayers are held usually during convocations. At convocation, each of the graduates of the Vishwa Bharati University is presented a branch of seven leaves from the Saptaparni (Chhatim) trees. Prayer Hall, where prayers are held on Wednesdays, is made of glass; it was founded by Maharshi Debendranath in 1863.



Left: Udayana and Right: Shyamali – Rabindranath used to stay in both of these houses sometimes – photos by author

Rabindranath Thakur or Tagore still remains the most respected and beloved Bengali poet, philosopher, author, composer, educator and a visionary in the minds of Bengali people all over the world. The bountiful, golden gift of his life's work touched practically every aspect of our existence and experience: human and spiritual love that often blended into each other, a deep appreciation of nature, arts, education, agriculture, religion and patriotism – among many. Even 67 years after his physical death, we Bengalis still continue to find inspiration, consolation and guidance in his poems, his stories and his songs that resonate with our innermost emotions and experiences on all possible occasions of life. His works include 28 volumes of poetry, short stories, novels, dramas, essays and speeches on a wide variety of topics ranging from education (including education of women), religion, spirituality to culture, letters and diaries as well as twenty five hundred songs broadly categorized in 'Prayers, Love, Nature, Motherland and Special Occasions'. He not only wrote the lyrics, but composed the music, set them to tunes or melodies and taught them to his nephew for the posterity. He is probably the only poet whose songs have the honor of being the national anthems of two sovereign countries: India and Bangladesh. Unfortunately, very little of the vast volumes of his writing is available in good quality English translation.

Rabindranath felt that the most important educational need for humanity was the full and free blossoming of human spirit. This poem powerfully expresses this view - a prayer for all human beings forever:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
 Where knowledge is free;  
 Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
   by narrow domestic walls;  
 Where words come out from the depth of the truth;  
 Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;  
 Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;  
 Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action,  
 Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake. [Translation from Bengali by Tagore]

- \*Daniel Schugurensky (Ed.), In History of Education: Selected Moments of the 20th Century [online]. Available: [http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel\\_schugurensky/assignment1/](http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky/assignment1/)

- All quotations from Rabindranath were translated by the author from his "Jibon-Smriti" written in Bengali, translated into English the title means 'memories of my life'.
- A word of caution to the eager, potential tourist: the reality may not live up to the idyllic picture of Shanti Niketan (abode of peace), as the surrounding areas of the campus are still-to-be developed, still-to-be cleaned, rural areas.
- This article was written to celebrate "Earth Day", April 22.