



# Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

## Rabindranath's Open-Air School System At Visva-Bharati And Its All-Time Relevance

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### Abstract:

Today, all the materialistic extravaganzas that we see in most of our so-called public/international school for children are in fact not needed. Perhaps children's likes and dreams are not built-in in them. Children would not have any time to think and decide on their own or to play as they wish and have fun. There is hardly any freedom to enjoy. Thus in the process, stress would overcome their peace, happiness, and joy of learning. Our children have forgotten to play with simple inexpensive earthy materials like earth, water, sand, pebbles, grass, leaves, paper etc. The urge to make creative toys by themselves and play-with is missing. They are not allowed to enjoy rain and get drenched.

Physically they are not fit enough to play Indian games like *Kho-kho*, *Kabadi*, *Malkhamb*, *Jujutsu*, *Yoga*, or Wrestling in an *Akhara*. Facilities like, cricket, football, basketball, volleyball, badminton, music, swimming, Gymnastic, Karate, Judo etc. even though exist in a few school, there are very few serious takers. There is no time to read a storybook or to visit a nearby forest, hilly areas, a park/garden, and place of interest or a riverside village and enjoy natural environment. There is no real-life understanding of trees, birds, seasonal-flowers, and animals. There is hardly any exposure to our heritage & culture. Seasonal changes come and pass but their colourful wings are not noticed. Learning through play & games and extra-curricular activities hardly exist. Thus fun is slowly disappearing from their life and such system is gradually leading them into a self-centered, insensitive person with an indifferent attitude towards their own environment, culture and society. In this Hi-tech era It is not an easy task to plan and devise an appropriate system of education for Children with focus on 'Play & Learn'. However, it may be worthwhile to look back, study & investigate into one of the internationally famous school for Children introduced by Rabindranath at Santiniketan & Sriniketan in the beginning of last century, By the way, that was also the beginning of Industrial age in India brought by the British-Raj.

In this paper the author intends to present an alternative methods of learning system for children

through a case study on open-air school system of education introduced by Rabindranath at Santiniketan in the beginning of the last century. Emphasis has been given on its philosophical aspect, aims & objectives, physical environment, learning components & methods, Teachings of the Ashrama. Special characteristics of the school, its activities including duties & responsibilities of the Gurus and the students etc. are also covered as far as possible.

*Keywords : Dreams, Freedom, Trust, Co-operation, Nature, Holistic learning, Delight.*

### **1. Introduction:**

In this market driven era even education on children has been industrialized. We are all concerned that most of our children are not behaving in a natural manner. They are reluctant to go to school. Perhaps while designing the curriculums, buildings and surroundings of their school their likes and dreams are not taken into account. Children there would not have any time to focus on anything by heart or to think and decide on their own. They do not have any leisure hours to be like them or to play the way they want and have fun. There is hardly any freedom and no joy of learning. They are overburdened & overstressed. Thus child like attitude are slowly disappearing from their life. This makes us worried but we too play our role negatively without even knowing. However the root cause of this appalling problem lies in the mechanically structured life style and in their learning system. Indian realities are not taken into account in them. We must acquire the ability to be human while dealing with the children and planning for them.

Children must get the due freedom, they deserve. They must be encouraged and allowed to do what naturally comes to them. Why they should be a victim of our faulty education policy & system. Our children have lost proximity & touch of nature & natural surroundings (which is known as the eternal teacher of mankind). They have forgotten to play with simple inexpensive earthy materials. Their natural urge to make toys and play-with is missing. They do not have time even to see dreams and live in their world of fantasy at their own discretions.

### **2. Approach:**

Whatever universal or international approach for designing a school for children we aim at, it would not have any relevance unless it is connected with the heritage & culture of the country where it is going to come up. However, it may be worthwhile to look back, study & investigate into one of the internationally famous school for Children introduced by Rabindranath at Santiniketan in the beginning of last century, By the way, that was also

the beginning of Industrial age in India brought by the British-Raj.

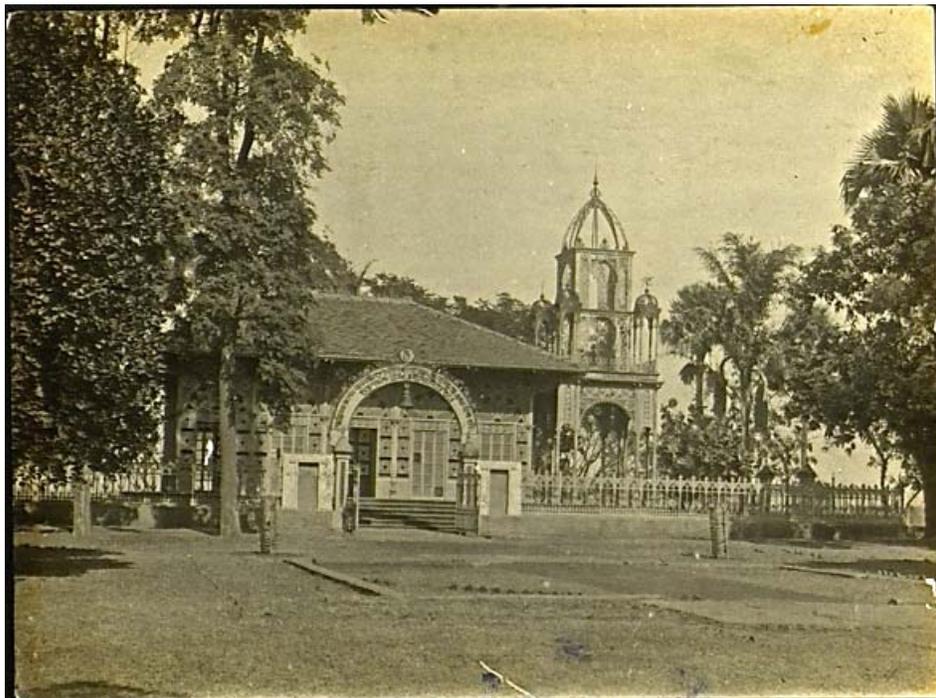
**2.1 Children, play & Learn:** In this connection, let me share a piece of an article written by Rabindranath regarding "Children". While introducing his "Nonsense Drama" for children he said, (translated by the author) "Without sunshine tree can not properly grow. Human mind too cannot properly grow without amusement & fun. It is really strange that in our country we even need to instruct to our children, 'Go and have fun'..... The truth is one can never become active and work like a young fellow without playing like a kid. And one cannot be matured enough without working like a young fellow ... If one has to come up in life then one must simultaneously possess all the three characteristics found in a child, young and an old man(Rabindranath T " Balak" , a magazine for the kid (2001; *Ashar* 1292).

**2.2 Seeds:** Rabindranath has carried out experimentations on children education in three distinct phases i) He had started a Home School (1898-1900) in a room at his *Kuthi-Bari* At Silaidaha, Bangladesh for the education of his five children (Bela, Rathi, Mira, Rani & Sami). They were of age between twelve to three years old. His dream school ii) Patha-Bhawan(1901-1923) at Santiniketan) grew from sapling of his home school. His third experimentation was iii) Siksha Satra(1924-1940) a Rural School at Sriniketan was his last experimentation. The scope of this presentation has been restricted to his 2<sup>nd</sup> experimentation as this is better known than the other two.

**2.2 Philosophy:** His philosophy on Education especially on children is considered well advanced even by today's standard. Rabindranath knew that holistic learning process couldn't take place within a closed four-walled compartment. His Ideals on education has been described in his book " Ashramer Rup O Bikash( 1940). His concept of ideal center of education for children was inspired by his deep-rooted faith in ancient Indian education & culture. He believed that learning system for the children should be developed from one's own traditional knowledge & wisdom and to be rooted in the soil. " Those who are familiar with Sanskrit literature well know that this (India) was not a colony of people with a primitive culture and mind. They were seekers of truth, for the sake of which they lived in an atmosphere of purity, but not of Puritanism; of the simple life, but not of self-mortification. They did not advocate celibacy and they had constant inter-communication with the other people who had to live the life of worldly interest"(T Rabindranath (1940) A Poet's School).

**2.3 Aims & Ideals:** His approach was not mere an innovation; it is a product of his absolute faith and belief on certain Indian values that led him to relate our elementary education system close to our nature, its tropical climate, environment, socio-economic condition and cultural ethos & heritage. He tried to reach his goal through experimentation. The purpose of this experimentation was is to make an individual a complete human being in all respect. His aim was to think beyond learning so that one would easily be able to link knowledge with the need of the society and enrich it to the best of their abilities.

“Freedom in the mere sense of independence has no content, and therefore no meaning. Perfect freedom lies in the perfect harmony of relationship, which we realize in this world - not through our response to it in knowing, but in being....It is only through the fullest development of all his capacities that man is likely to achieve his real freedom” (T Rabindranath (1940) A Poet’s School). Another aim of this unique education system for children was to make them aware & understand their potential at the earliest possible opportunity through freedom & with joyful learning experience. That is why he avoided the prevailing rigid borrowed system burdened with lifeless syllabi and conceived his open-air school in tune with ancient Indian philosophy. In the process he was able to recreate a unique ancient *Tapovana* like environment (A residential campus planned in complete harmony with nature in a rural setting) as per his own vision and realized in transforming his dream into reality through experimentation by employing committed, sensitive, & creative persons with requisite spirit & leadership abilities.



A view of the Ashram *mandir* set up by Devendranath

### 3. Santiniketan & The Poet' School & the principles

Tagore's father Maharshi Devendranath had initially set up Santiniketan in 1863 and in 1888 he dedicated this site for establishment of an Ashrama by a trust deed. Rabindranath started the school there within the Ashrama area in 1901 with 5 boys and 5 teachers and named the school Brahmacharyasrama as per the deed. Soon he started experimentation with it. The name was changed the following year to Brahma Vidyalaya and later named Patha-Bhavana, as did several features of its functioning, especially in emphasizing the minimalism of its curriculum and the maximalism of its varied forms of activity with the 'idea of joy and happiness' pervading the students. As Tagore put it, "Mind is greater than education, vigor greater than information; under the weight of the printed word no energy is left in us to make use of our minds."



A view of the Ashram (Nichu-Bungalow, Santiniketan by Nandalal).

**3.1 Principles:** The school was conceived & designed as a residential one. It still upholds Tagore's ideal of education and still a deviation from other conventional institutions. While designing the school and its curriculum, he made a complete departure from the prevailing system introduced by the British and burdened with lifeless structure. It is

designed in harmony with nature. Co-operation, Mutual trust, freedom, self-discipline, self-restrain and Joy are the six basic principles of the school. These are managed & practiced by the Students council (Ashram Sammilani).



Open-air class (1)



Open-air class (2)

**3.2 Physical form:** The school was conceived as a barrier free (No boundary wall, no fencing between the functional spaces or with the outside areas) environment. There is not much physical materials in the school. The classes are held in open air in the shade of trees where man and nature entered into an immediate harmonious relationship. Informal trees & hedges are planned throughout the campus surrounding all the functional spaces and play fields. The Idea was to create an open and at the same time close-nit family like friendly atmosphere.



Children playing in open air

**3.3 Life and practices in the school:** Teachers and students lived, ate, played and shared their thought & feelings together and enjoyed almost same simple socio-cultural life in a hamlet like settings. All the students, teachers and other officials of the school attend the morning prayers daily in front of school office and the weekly Upasana in Mandir. Teacher also spend time with the students in the evening, Innovate new games,engage them with witty and humorous discussion along with preparation of their studies. Life for the student at Santiniketan is delightful and not dull at all.

**3.4 The curriculum:** The curriculum was varied, unconventional and joyful. Apart from the customary subjects, equal emphasis is given on creativity, creative self-expressions, Skill based work, Co curricular activities & hands on experience in the area of Art & Craft,

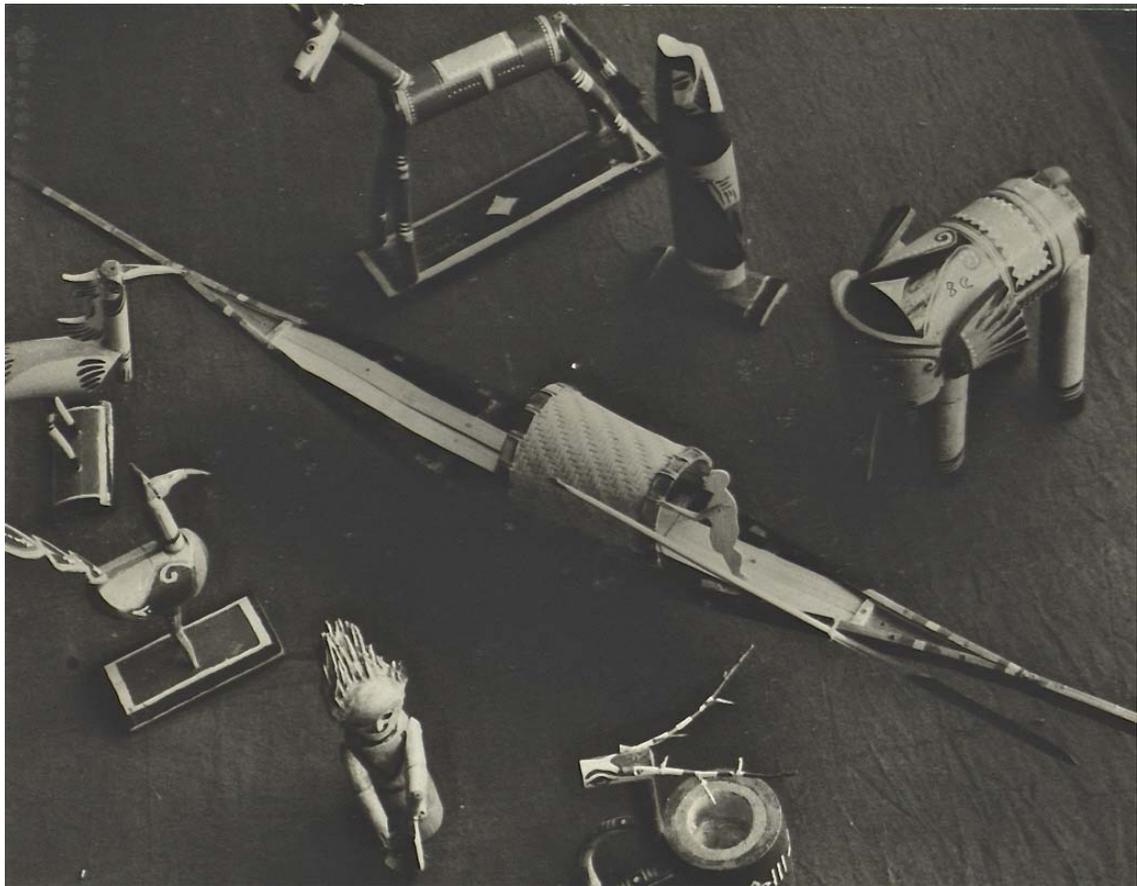
music, drama, Recitation, Creative writing, Nature study, Campus cleaning, Games and Physical education (Not as an extra-curricular activities). In the lower classes (up to class IV) more emphasis was given on interactive learning methods on direct Teacher-Student and Student-Student interaction. Subjects like Storey telling, Nature study (study of nature in relation to life and the daily experiences of life), Field Visit (to village, place of interest & museum) serve as an introduction to Science, History & Geography. An hour per week is kept for discussion on virtues of good human being & Moral Science. A Small and beautiful mud structure with a glass case called Chaiti was built in the heart of the Ashram for displaying any unique innovation by any students to be seen by others. This is how Rabindranath tried to go beyond learning to add completeness of an individual. Students form several body/ wings that they manage themselves. The most important of these are: Paribesh(Environment), Sahitya(Literary), Seva(Social Service) and a Disciplinary wing for each class.

**3.5 Teaching & Learning Methods:** The following learning methods are in practice in the school. Approximate time slot allotted for textual, visual, interactive and experiential methods (Learning by doing) are in the ratio of 20:20; 20:20. Twenty percent of the time is allotted for playing games. Teacher's responsibility is not only to teach but also to enhance the scope of learning through following methods:

i) To think and learn from mistake & case studies (self-learning through mental faculty),  
ii) To observe, investigate, Interpret and learn(Sensual), iii) Directly information from books(textual), iv) To Explore and learn(practical exposure), and v) To Innovate & learn (creativity). Subjects are taught in isolation as well as in an integrated manner. Emphasis is given on empowering the students as much as possible. Workshops, Discourse (By well-known personalities, Performance by renowned individual & group Artist(s)) are organized from time to time. Teachers are responsible to organize exhibitions of students' work (with the help of the students), exposure & apprenticeship to a field or situation (for relating learning to a real life situation) and interactive programmes in the area of Art, Craft, Culture, Health, and Religion etc. throughout the year (which are live & educative). Preparing the students for cultural events, functions & festivals etc. also comes under teachers' responsibility. Regarding acquiring of craft skills, students primarily learn various skills from the senior students. Teachers used to play the role of a supervisor only. Working on practical projects. Special stress is put on i) to inculcate personal creativity and the cultivation of manual skills, and ii) arts and crafts to develop sensibilities in aesthetics and Indian culture & traditions. Yoga, Meditation, Pranayama is also planned for the students. They need more support when they cannot cope with something.



Meditations



Products made by the children

Another responsibility on the teacher was to Creation of appropriate books & resource materials for the children. Rabindranath himself wrote a few books including the famous "Sahaj Path" for the children.

3.6 Functions & Festivals are naturally built-in in the whole system as a part of curriculum and very much part of the learning system. The working calendar of the school is filled with various seasonal festivities throughout the year. It is ensured that almost every member of the community would have something to contribute. It is absolute fun for the students & staff to organize, conduct, decorate & actively participate for its successful implementation. Through these function & festivals he tried to build an atmosphere of creativity & aesthetic refinement(Full details of the information on this area are given in Appendix-1).

**Conclusion:** But whatever we plan, there are so many impediments. The so called policy makers, educators as well as parents themselves. We also need people. we need dedicated teachers with conviction for its implementation. While looking for right teachers, Rabindranath once said *"I am trying hard to start a school in Santiniketan. I want it to be like the ancient hermitages we know about. There will be no luxuries; the rich and poor alike will live like ascetics. But I cannot find the right teachers. It is proving impossible to combine today's practices with yesterday ideals. Simplicity and hard work are not tempting enough.... We are becoming spoilt by wasteful pleasure and lack of self-control. Not being able to accept poverty is at the root of our defeat."* It is needless to mention that Visva-Bharati is slowly going away from its original ideals of Rabindranath. It is not because the students want this shift but because of the market need and the demands. As we all are aware that the main purpose of today's education system is to make somebody equipped to find a good job. But still the fact remains that the exception rules and Rabindranath's alternative methods of learning system for children has a validity.

### **Acknowledgment:**

The author sincerely acknowledge

- i) Prof. S. Majumder, Director, Rabindra Bhavana, Visva-Bharati and its staff of Library & Audio-visual wing.
- ii) Sri S S Dasgupta, Senior System Analyst & In charge, Computer Center, Visva-Bharati for the generous help provided by them to make this possible.

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## Appendix-1

<u>List Of functions &amp; Festivals</u>	<u>Date (as per Bengali calendar)</u>
1. Celebration of New Year	1 <sup>st</sup> Baisakh
2. Birthday calibration of Rabindranath	25 <sup>th</sup> Baisakh
3. Birthday calibration of Buddha	Baisakhi Purnima
4. Raksha Bandhan	Rakshi Purnima
5. Tree-planting ceremony	22 <sup>nd</sup> Srabana
6. Halakarshana(Ploughing ceremony)	23 <sup>rd</sup> Srabana
7. Celebration of Independence day	15 <sup>th</sup> August
8. Rain Festival	Last week of August
9. Silpotsav (Festival on Creative Industries)	17 <sup>th</sup> September
10. Dance & Drama Festival (Sarodotsav) (2-week duration)	Before Winter Recess
11. Rammohan Remembrance	27 <sup>th</sup> September
12. Ananda-mela(Fair of food & hand made Products by the children)	On Mahalaya
13. Craft Festival (Rahindra Silpa Mela)	27 <sup>th</sup> November
14. Art Festival (Nandan Mela)	1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> December

15. Rice Festival (Nabanna)	Last day of Aghrayana
16. Pous-Mela	7 <sup>th</sup> to 9 <sup>th</sup> Pous
17. School Convocation	8 <sup>th</sup> Pous
18. Christ must day Celebration	25 <sup>th</sup> Decmber
19. Maharshi Rememberabce	6 <sup>th</sup> Magh
20. Republic day Celebration	26 <sup>th</sup> January
21. Holi-Festival (Vasantotsav)	Dol Purnima
22. Gandhi Rememberabce	10 <sup>th</sup> March
23. Celebration of the year-end	30 <sup>th</sup> Chaitra

## Appendix-2

<u>List Of Picture/Photograph</u>	<u>Source/Artist</u>
1. Nichu-Bungalow,Santiniketan	Rabindra Bhavana, VB/ Nandalal Bose
2. Open-air class (1)	Do / Old photograph
3. Open-air class (2)	Do / Old photograph
4. View of old Santiniketa(Mandir)	Do / Old photograph
5. Children playing in open air	Do / Old photograph
6. Products made by the children	Do / Old photograph

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 Graduated in Architecture from Calcutta University and did M.Des. from IDC, IIT Bombay in 1981.  
 Worked as a faculty of Industrial Design (product) at National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad and taught Product Design for more than five years(1981-'87). Joined Visva-Bharati as Reader in Design in March 1987. Presently Professor of Design at Silpa-Sadana, since 1995. Silpa-Sadana is a Craft Wing of Visva-Bharati and one of the oldest Technical Institution of India (established in 1922). It has three broad divisions: Training, Production & Marketing and Training cum Production center in seven craft based trades. Worked as HOD for more than ten years. During that period designed several furniture system, Interiors & Architecture of buildings. Designed and introduced three

Polytechnic level Professional Diploma courses in the discipline of Furniture-Interior, Hand-loom Textile and Pottery-Ceramic in Silpa-Sadana(1998). Mainly teach Basic design & drawing, Constructional Technology, Ergonomics, Indian Craft, Product Design, Furniture and Interior for these courses. Also worked as Dean of the Institute of Rural Reconstruction at Sriniketan, Visva-Bharati for a two-year term and Vice-chancellor (In-charge) of Visva-Bharati for two months in 2007. Had opportunity to work with many Eminent Designers on Various projects in the area of Architecture, Furniture, Interior, Product, Exhibition, Museum and Indian Craft design. Main interests are in Furniture & Accessory design, Experimental Architecture, Children's education and working for the cause of Craft.