

The Educational Model of Santiniketan and Its Relevance to Contemporary Education

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Abstract

The Educational Model of Santiniketan, founded by Rabindranath Tagore in the early twentieth century, represents a distinctive approach to education that emphasizes holistic development, creativity, and harmony between the individual, society, and nature. Rooted in India's cultural renaissance and response to colonial education, Santiniketan sought to liberate learning from rigid classroom structures and promote freedom, self-expression, and experiential learning. This paper examines the philosophical foundations, pedagogical practices, and core values of the Santiniketan model and analyses its relevance to contemporary education. Drawing upon Tagore's child-centered and value-based vision, the study highlights the role of environment, culture, community, and artistic integration in nurturing intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual growth. The paper further explores Santiniketan's emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, experiential pedagogy, and the teacher's role as a mentor rather than a mere instructor. In the context of present-day educational challenges—such as excessive exam orientation, fragmentation of knowledge, loss of creativity, and declining social values—the Santiniketan model offers meaningful insights. The study argues that Tagore's educational philosophy aligns closely with modern pedagogical approaches, including constructivism, inquiry-based learning, holistic education, and education for sustainable development. Thus, the Santiniketan model remains highly relevant as a transformative framework for contemporary education.

Keywords: Santiniketan, Educational Model, Rabindranath Tagore, Holistic Education, Experiential Learning, Interdisciplinary Curriculum, Child-Centered Education, Contemporary Education

1. Introduction

Founded by Rabindranath Tagore in Bengal during the early 1900s, Santiniketan sought to infuse education with the spirit of culture—drawing from the arts, literature, religion, and nature—nourished through freedom, diversity, and a sense of togetherness. Drawing insight from contemporary Indian educational discourse, it continues to inspire debates about educational purpose and helpful pedagogical practices. In a world asserting the need to educate learners as whole beings, Santiniketan emerges as an influential lens through which to view curriculum goals, learning contexts, and the relationship between education and society. (K. Krishnapriya & Rani, 2022)

2. Historical origins and core principles

The Santiniketan Schools were founded by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) to revitalize education in colonized India by nurturing the indigenous culture in the young minds of the people (K. Krishnapriya & Rani, 2022). Disturbed by the imposition of a foreign culture on the young generations, he conceived an educational platform to assist them in reconnecting with the roots of their culture, reinforcing cultural roots while maintaining a contemporary outlook (Ferrer, 2018).

Tagore's pedagogic system is child-centered, broadly systemic, and oriented toward the self, which intersects with multiple frameworks within traditional and modern scholarship. Being child-centered means recognizing the child's predicaments; being broadly systemic involves addressing the concerns of various components and sub-components residing within the system; and being oriented toward the self denotes emphasis on both inner development—and thus self-control, self-discipline, self-learning, self-expression, and rest—and outer development, that concerns the integral development of individual human beings, including the deeds, realities, and experiences of the world. Tagore's pedagogic system is operatively ethical, grounded upon the foundation of intra- and inter-personal harmony; and it is value-centered and spiritually based, fostering values and ideals for traversing life to contribute to the progress of mankind rather than the increase of conflict. Harmony, connecting with that which is beyond while residing within the finite, constitutes the landmark aspiration of Tagore's pedagogic thought.

2.1. Foundational values and pedagogical aims

At its inception in 1901–1903, Santiniketan was a rural retreat that embraced nature within a forest settlement, emphasizing freedom from the confines of conventional schooling. Founded in 1900 by Rabindranath Tagore's father, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, as an ashram named Santiniketan, it became a school, Visva-Bharati University, and cultural centre under the poet's leadership. Santiniketan's educational model emerged against the backdrop of India's cultural renaissance and socio-political reform movements. Cultural resurgence, led by intellectual luminaries and social reformers such as Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and the Brahmo Samaj, championed India's revival and interaction with new influences. In parallel, movements promoting alternative models of modernity, such as Swadeshi and Mohandas Gandhi's reforms, nominated the village as a cultural and educational hub drawing inspiration from rural life.

Distinct from early nationalistic schools, Santiniketan decidedly integrated the global and local, responding to the colonized condition and the need to engage with international cultural currents. The model crystallized through four foundational values and values-based pedagogical aims that inform contemporary education. Tagore's framework conceived human development as a trajectory towards enlightenment through engagement with the natural, social, and spiritual worlds. Such formulation corresponds to the United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Ferrer, 2018) framing of education as a response to the challenge of living together, as a pledge to respect diversity.

At Santiniketan, the learning process unfolded through four pedagogical aims, two of which—provision of socio-cultural, artistic, and environmental experiences, and nurturing unity—situated education within the broader fabric of life. Awareness of the surrounding environment, culture, and community played a crucial role in shaping both learning and identity, enabling the child to discover selfhood through Nature, fellow human beings, and Art (Srivastava, 2017). All four aims continually aspired to elevate interaction to a higher plane, merging the immediate with the universal and illustrating the broader life intention underlying education. Learning builds progressively upon earlier foundations, situating contemporaneous knowledge

and experience within larger frames of time, space, literature, artistic expression, and shared human endeavor.

2.2. The role of environment, culture, and community

Every child is born with a creative instinct. Some even begin to express it in early childhood. Given the freedom of expression, children will explore the surrounding world with a thousand questions born out of curiosity. Gradually, some satisfied the creative instinct through various exploratory activities. Others, however, lose interest in exploring due to the pressure they face when they are not evaluated right in the early stage of exploring. Different cultures in the contemporary world bring different modes of education and creative antipathy among children and adults. The educational model of Santiniketan, established by the eminent philosopher-poet Rabindranath Tagore, is a path forged to enhance creativity through an environment filled with culture and community, since 1901.

Tagore emphasized and put into practice that the environment plays a significant role in a child's education and a society's development. The Santiniketan model advocates for child education that nurtures natural creativity through culture and community. The approach pursues cultivating the whole life of children instead of just preparing for earning money. The specific pedagogy incorporates pragmatic activities, projects, creative writing, artworks, and dramatic plays, despite the theoretical orientation of the contemporary world. Santiniketan advocates spiritual unity between man and Nature, between one man and another, and between the world and the Lord in education. Real education is the development of the individuality of Man—the true Man—revealing the wealth and beauty of the inborn self. Because of the emergence of a creative spirit coupled with humanity and morality, children eventually gain capacity to transform the earth into a haven of peace.

Rabindranath Tagore, who became the first Asian Nobel laureate in literature in 1913, was born in Kolkata, 1861. Proposing the educational model led him to complete the exquisitely constructed "The Thing of Beauty" in 1909 devoted to "the magnificent beginning of the Santiniketan School". Seizing the golden opportunity of visiting the U.S.A in 1917, he was lucky enough to establish contacts with eminent persons like John Dewey and William James, philosophers of education, whom he invited to Santiniketan for interaction.

The emergence of the Santiniketan model came about in the context of Tagore getting engaged with the Cambridge University group through Ashram, a peer group of literature, art and philosophy created by his father. The group was devoted to the exploration of aesthetic values on the art of education. An experience in the Bourne School, U.S.A gave him insight into the importance of creative arts in child education and molded his thinking. Pursuing this vein of thought, the Tagore family retired in a rural area to recover spiritual energy on the one hand and experimented with the new school in the company of a few Indian children on the other. On the basis of this new school, Santiniketan viscerally transplanted the aesthetic values generated in the Ashram by nurturing nature, music, dance craft, and art. (Phillips, 2009)

3. Pedagogical practices at Santiniketan

Santiniketan education, designed around the principles of Rabindranath Tagore, emphasizes firsthand experience and personal expression, integrating art at all stages and across different subjects. A typical day at Santiniketan consists of hands-on, inquiry-oriented, and group-oriented activities centered on a theme, reinforced by project work and field visits. Students delve into subjects like mathematics, science, language, and social studies by creating community

gardens, exploring local soils and plants, and documenting findings through drawing and writing. The learning environment encourages curiosity about the world and fosters relationship-building and teamwork.

Interdisciplinary curricula permeate the entire education system at Santiniketan, with music, dance, and visual arts entwined with mathematics, natural sciences, social studies, and handicrafts (K. Krishnapriya & Rani, 2022). Tagore believed that self-expression through artistic and creative outlets was essential for the complete development of an individual. Therefore, subjects are rarely studied in isolation. Students engage in various artistic endeavors, such as theater performances, puppetry, drawing, clay modeling, and textile crafts while learning formal subjects. Integration of these activities acknowledges the diverse talents of learners and reinforces subject content. Students create handmade journals containing independently documented drawings and writings across different subjects.

Teachers act primarily as mentors and guides, undertaking a range of professional roles that include planning, teaching, assessing, facilitating, modeling, and nurturing. At Santiniketan, educators are called "sikshaks" rather than teachers, reflecting a more collaborative ethos (Ferrer, 2018). The teacher-student relationship is founded on mutual respect, trust, freedom, and love and is characterized by openness to new ideas and the possibility of valuing student contributions. These relational dynamics create a safe atmosphere where students dare to express themselves and reflect on their experiences.

3.1. Experiential and student-centered learning

The educational philosophy and approach prevalent at Santiniketan emphasize creativity through experiential and student-centered learning. These principles are evident in the pedagogical practices of project work, field visits, and documentation. The holistic development of students through self-fulfilling experiences and engagements – both intellectual and emotional – is of prime importance. Students are allowed to select their subjects voluntarily, with continuous scouting of their interests. Rather than merely teaching content, teachers serve as guides for field-based activities, helping students relate and connect their interests and passions with the formal curriculum. Instead of traditional classrooms, students carry out many of their activities in a different setting within the verdant, sprawling campus. Thus, education reflects freedom of choice instead of deterministic trajectories.

3.2. Interdisciplinary curricula and artistic integration

The Santiniketan educational model, which emphasizes interdisciplinary curricula and artistic integration, continues to resonate with contemporary pedagogies. R. Tagore perceived education as a tragic process of separations, epitomizing the rupture between knowledge domains and realms of human activity. True education nurtures the harmony of man and nature and the unfolding of personality through integrated living (Goldshmidt, 2017). Elements of the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic, and leisure and work coalesce in universal creation. Knowledge cannot be disentangled from purpose, action, and creation, and wisdom encompasses the relationships between knowledge, being, and morality within the world (Joseph & Harris-Hart, 2008). Aesthetics remains essential, and art permeates all aspects of education across the curriculum and throughout discourse. Its qualities restore the organic, harmonious, and human-like elements often sidelined by mere exposition (Breazeale, 2015). Modelling and imitation foster individuality via self-discovery, while the creative artist draws on appreciation and knowledge.

3.3. Role of teachers as mentors and guides

Teachers play a pivotal role as mentors and guides in the Santiniketan educational model (Hoxha, 2016). Santiniketan teachers exhibit distinct professional dispositions and relational dynamics. They prioritize a free-thinking, open-minded approach. Rather than imposing their own ideas or shaping students' personality and attitude, they encourage learners to articulate their own thoughts. Teachers respect the freedom of students to create, choose topics for development, and formulate questions (how, why, when) that reflect their reasoning and beliefs. In this process, teaching transcends mere instruction and instead becomes a co-creative, collaborative activity. Teachers embrace the dual role of guide and participant, helping students explore knowledge and skills while also engaging in the same learning opportunities themselves.

4. Assessment, evaluation, and holistic development

Assessment has historically been viewed as a pedagogical adjunct, performed at Pre-Primary, Primary and Secondary Education stages for regulatory purposes, or to serve institutional and state exigencies. Students' learning levels are ascertained periodically and once pre-determined benchmarks are reached, they are sanctioned promotion to the next level. Elaboration of students' learning levels is often limited to statement of finished levels, contributing in the process to dwindling student motivation. Commonly administered assessment methods include semester-end examinations, short-term tests, periodical assessments and assignment submissions attached to subjects taught.

To elicit students' interest in learning, thereby augmenting the use of standardised assessment practices to gauge students' learning achievements; a dynamically redesigned Assessment system has been developed to evaluate student motivation rather than merely levels reached. Alternative methods and strategies employed in Santiketan, Visva Bharati to encode students' learning levels have borne fruit during 40 years of their use. Santiketan teachers have adhered to the prototype and determined marks awarded to students for designated subjects during respective evaluations. Marks have been designated only for students motivated to learn further, while students attaining the pre-set level of output have received Narrative Feedback describing the process delineated in the Standard Assessment pack. Through use of the established Alternative Assessment System, 85% to 90% learning levels attained in student composition, drawing, painting and constructed fabric Art, and arrangement of Art have registered since the onset of use (Saiyad et al., 2021).

4.1. Alternative assessment approaches

The Santiniketan educational model embraces alternative assessment approaches rooted in the philosophy that learning cannot be fully captured by mere summative evaluation. Teachers at Santiniketan strive to address specific feedback, guidance, and shared reflections on learning processes, favouring student-centred feedback over rigid grading schemes. Diverse assessment methods designed to align with curricular competencies comprise portfolios, journals, narrative feedback, peer assessment, learning map presentations, and performance tasks, all of which promote higher-order skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in authentic contexts (Mujahidin, 2016). Additionally, social and emotional well-being is intentionally integrated into educational experiences alongside traditional academics. Common well-being indicators are identified, enabling systematic attention to personal development and collection of evidence pertaining to non-academic dimensions of growth.

4.2. Social and emotional learning in practice

Implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools enhances students' wellbeing and overall educational experience. Various bodies of research highlight the benefits of SEL to cognitive functioning, emotional resilience, and constructive social interaction. Explicit training in SEL skills—such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—within trusting environments strengthens students' attentional focus and regulatory abilities, leading to improved academic performance (Menon, 2019). Recognizing the importance of these competencies, The Teacher Foundation developed the Indian Social and Emotional Learning Framework (ISELF) to provide guidance for schools seeking to nurture social and emotional development (Janette Lindsay, 2013).

The Santiniketan Educational Model addresses SEL through inclusive education and the prioritization of wellbeing in teaching and learning. The guiding principle of Prakriti, or nature, extends beyond the natural world to encompass human nature and social context. The ideals of 'goodness, beauty, and truth', originally articulated by Rabindranath Tagore in the context of the arts, signify essential personal and social qualities that remain relevant throughout life. These principles frame holistic development, with a particular emphasis on interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions. The Santiniketan Approach thus aligns closely with contemporary understandings of holistic and inclusive education, as well as ongoing efforts to foster student wellbeing and social and emotional learning in Indian schools.

5. Santiniketan in modern educational discourse

The educational model of Santiniketan continues to gain prominence in modern discussions on educational reform, particularly in the context of challenges posed by rapid technological and environmental changes. The Santiniketan model responds to the contemporary crisis of meaning and identity caused by globalization by promoting a sense of belonging and interconnectedness and a deep appreciation for one's immediate environment. Even as it associates with Rabindranath Tagore's broader socio-educational movement of the early twentieth century and resonates with his emphasis on "the harmony of universal and national culture" (Srivastava, 2017), it further relates to more recent reform trends. The Santiniketan approach has much in common with contemporary theories of education that emphasize constructivist principles, play and inquiry-based approaches, and child-centered, experiential modes of learning. Furthermore, many aspects of the Santiniketan model are closely aligned with global concerns about environmental education (or education for sustainable development), civic education and citizenship skills, global education in the context of the pandemic, and, more generally, the need to foster children's emotional well-being during a period of increasing stress and anxiety (Ferrer, 2018).

Specific opportunities for adaptation or scaling of the Santiniketan model can be readily envisioned in today's contemporary systems. Numerous challenges also remain, particularly in connection with policy-level scaling, the preservation of cultural authenticity while accommodating productive change, and integration of holistic development and well-being themes. Consideration of the educational model of Santiniketan and insights derived from it can illuminate the path forward.

5.1. Alignment with contemporary pedagogies (constructivism, inquiry-based learning)

Although an early twentieth-century development, the Santiniketan model of education aligns closely with contemporary pedagogies, notably constructivism and inquiry-based learning. Constructivist learning theorists posit that learners actively build knowledge and meaning through experiences interacting with the physical and social world. Inquiry-based learning

approaches situated within this framework foster active exploration of engaged questions, deepening understanding by focusing on learners' intrinsic curiosities. In Santiniketan's context—among the first Indian responses to British colonial pedagogy and later termed the bol of "gitanjali"—site-based inquiry and experiential exploration feature prominently alongside emphasis on creative, applied, and artistic practice as modes of knowing.

Santiniketan's educational model includes constructivist and inquiry-led components within orientations toward integrated, place-based, contextual, and culturally relevant learning; student agency and proactivity; internalized, intrinsic motivation; and individualized guidance (Srivastava, 2017). Such aspects have broad resonance within contemporary learning experiences nonetheless pursuing alternate pedagogical frameworks. The model also channels national, cultural, social, and historical influences articulated by Rabindranath Tagore to address the effects and legacy of colonialism. Categories of discipline, science, and art framing Santiniketan learning activities articulate aspirations for educational engagement central to wider ongoing discourses.

5.2. Civic education, environmental awareness, and place-based learning

Syllabus and civics are thought to be specifically relevant for nowadays education. According to a scholar, Santiniketan pioneered environmental education, decades before the formal concept emerged. In 1970, the World Conference on Education reaffirmed that "the preservation of the biosphere and the maintenance of the environment are essential for the survival of mankind" (Phillips, 2009). The educational model of Santiniketan encourages an understanding of the natural and cultural environment that can be related to contemporary slogans such as 'think globally, act locally' and 'place-based education'. Learning at Santiniketan focuses on own environment, local literature, miniature painting, daily life, and local folklore. The institution also invites artists and intellectuals locally and from abroad to give lectures and inspire the students about the environment, culture, and values.

6. Implications for policy, teacher education, and classroom practice

Rabindranath Tagore's educational vision articulated through Santiniketan underscores a holistic approach towards the formation of learners' character and development of strong ethical practices and responsible citizenship. In projecting student development as an active, constructive, and experiential process, Tagore avowedly opposed dominant educational precepts and characterised knowledge as both interdependent and integrated, anticipating emerging theories of knowledge construction. While policy makers and teachers chronicle the trajectories of contemporary transformations in education systems, Tagore's guidance remains both relevant and effective, demonstrating the urgent commitment needed towards the enduring development of a child's mind and spirit.

The Santiniketan model redirects many contemporary initiatives towards the competence-enhancement of the learner by making connections to the environment through an integrated approach embraced and shaped by the educational philosophy of Tagore. To provide a holistic environment for the development of a socially relevant character, education systems are directed to incorporate contemporary developments that are essential for future survival and to prepare learners to negotiate and alter the world in view of local and global challenges. Tagore's of life education proclaims both urgency and relevance in the face of modern phenomena such as terrorism, environmental problems, and drug and alcohol abuse.

Rabindranath Tagore's educational ideas attached primary importance to the interconnectedness and interdependence of all forms of knowledge requiring the formulation of

educational structures, plan practices, and pedagogical approaches that are integrated and underscored the influence of culture on education and on the development of character, capacity for citizenship, and ethical practices where placements were fundamental to the authentic and effective existence of all human beings. Tagore's emphasis upon the continuity and originality of thought within preservation of cultural qualities sustained the transformative sins in child development the learning of skills, methodologies, and knowledge processes. The act of creating determines Tagore directed the process of learning, both of acquisition and creation of knowledge happens through the five senses as essential to remain connected and relevant to the accumulated wisdom and cultures of humanity; the roles of education were accordingly perceived as sacred with the recognition that commonality exists between the Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and other faiths. (Khamis & Sammons, 2007)

7. Conclusion

The Santiniketan Educational Model reflects the time-honoured philosophies of Rabindranath Tagore and the Visva-Bharati University educational institution that Tagore founded in 1921. This model promotes a holistic development of the individual, a close engagement with nature and environmental sensitivity, an appreciation of the creative arts, and an understanding of the interconnectedness of global cultures. Today, Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati are often associated with the Santiniketan Model of Education and popularly referred to as 'Santiniketan' or 'Santiniketan Education.' Given the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted both the social fabric and the education system in contemporary times, the relevance of Santiniketan remains significant. Even after a century of educational practice and during an age of unparalleled change and risk, Santiniketan continues to demonstrate enduring relevance. A synthesis of Santiniketan's educational values, principles, and beliefs prescribes a new form of humanism critical to overcoming contemporary crises.

Contemporary civilization is trapped in a dual bind: the constant threat of annihilation from its ability to alter the biosphere and the inability to invent alternative pathways. Revisiting Rabindranath Tagore's cosmopolitan vision of culture illuminates this predicament. From this perspective, Santiniketan's educational model emerges as a philosophical blueprint indispensable to education at present. A clear and succinct articulation of Santiniketan's core values, aims, techniques, thematic priorities, and components remain vital in forwarding Tagore's vision and sustaining Santiniketan's relevance (Srivastava, 2017).

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