

Tagore's Shantiniketan: A legend

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Satyajit Ray had once remarked, "On August 7, 1941, in the city of Calcutta, a man died. His mortal remains perished, but he left behind a heritage which no fire could consume".

During my stopover to Bangladesh, I was astounded to see people irrespective of class, gender, profession humming Rabindrasangeet and even the mobile ringtones also reminded the colossal respect they held for their 'Gurudev', Rabindranath Tagore. When asked a rickshaw-puller, with great reverence he went on talking about Tagore-his solace in rural East Bengal, Tagore's sorrow in the Bengal partition, his Bangladeshi anthem..... 'Amar shonar bangla ami tomai bhalobashi' (Oh my golden Bengal, I love you).

Shantiniketan

Maharshi Debendranath Tagore (Rabindranath Tagore's father) was allured by the red soiled vast greeny patches full of saal, deodar trees and tiny rivulets feeding the meadows. There were plenty of chatim trees which released intoxicating hue during nightfall. Maharishi bought this plot and set it up as Shantiniketan (abode of peace), intending to make it an ideal place for meditation. Still the place 'Chatim tala' exists which reverberates with the memories of the Tagore family who found divine peace through contemplation.

Tagore started Patha Bhavan, with a notion to impart all round development among students.

History behind the birth of Shantiniketan

It is a matter of great fulfilment to write about a genius who was a poet, a philosopher, a composer and above all a revolutionary. Tagore belonged to a family of gifted members.

He was sent to school, but was not satisfied with the pedagogy. His sudden dropout in the long run benefitted people to consider and moderate their thought process otherwise. According to him one can cultivate education in the open as the mind comes in touch with nature. Such profound ideas led him to build his own hermitage called Shantiniketan in 1901. Though he had to shell out the copyright of his books and his wife's ornaments, he did not deter in his vision. The inception was with five students including Tagore's own son.

Hats off to the modern outlook of Tagore which shunned the typical westernised hypothesis of mugging text books and exam oriented syllabus! Shantiniketan has an autonomous university and caters to an eco-friendly environment!

It is said that there were a group of scot-free dacoits who had hideout at a small village called Bhuvandanga (a region just next to Shantiniketan). Rabindranath Tagore's father, Maharshi Debendranath had been successful in reforming those souls and engaging them as peasants, gatekeepers or even errand boys at Shantiniketan.

Huge accolades to the guts and perseverance of Maharshi, who could manage to teach the society the art of rehabilitation!

Such a noble family background Tagore belonged to!

My sojourn at Shantiniketan

As the bus drove through the dusty roads, little did I expect that a sweeping proffer of tall 'sal' trees, a cosy hermitage and a 'huge family outside the family' would await me.

It was dusk and there was no electricity. The darkness was sinister coupled with the sound of cricket.

I could hear the faint chanting of prayers. As I drew near, I came across a couple of students approaching me with lanterns in their hands. They escorted me to the 'Upasana Ghar' (prayer

hall). I immediately felt at home.

I had been privileged enough to spend a couple of days at Shantiniketan. I had entered that region with a mere curiosity to venture into the open classrooms and delve in the lessons. But on my return,

I was loaded with an unfurled chapter-laden with immense love for different subjects, creativity and a quench to serve nature and generations to come.

A day at Shantiniketan sets off at daybreak with students cleaning their rooms and also their surroundings.

Perhaps the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan concept could be far more effective if every household could culminate the values of cleanliness amongst the wards.

Next follows the assembling and singing of the morning prayer. The culmination of twittering of sparrows, the song of the nightingale, the rhythmic clinging of bells and synchronisation of morning 'raaga' definitely showed a glorious day ahead.

Tagore essentially belonged to 'Brahmo-samaj', a sect which was considered an outcast by the society then. The religious dogmas are discarded and also the members of 'Brahmo-samaj' do not follow the teachings of the vedas. But astoundingly, Tagore created 'Keertanas', 'thungris' and 'toppas' which elevated the human soul from its body to obtain 'nirvana'. He believed that unless one is rid of mental barriers like gender inequality, casteism, narrow-mindedness, arduous search for the divine is useless. Endless Brahmo-sangeet have been composed by Tagore which are still practised during Poush Mela which I shall discuss later in this essay.

Physical education and meditation (upasana) were essential parts of the curriculum and the real essence of breathing can only be achieved in the lap of nature-smell of 'chhatim' flowers, rustle of dry leaves, sound of peacocks. I have been fortunate enough to walk bare-footed all around the forest surrounding Shantiniketan and I am indebted to Tagore for unravelling a new sphere of natural beauty, with beings peaceful in their habitat.

It may apparently seem that teaching devoid of a classroom should inevitably land up in indiscipline and recklessness. But strangely though Tagore had set limit for every activity and bounded the timings. So, the students were aware of the resonance of every bell and its indication as to what task to follow. We all stood in queues for lunch chit-chatting as we munched the simple tasty meal.

An urbanite gets exhausted under the slightest pressure. But, in the midst of flora and fauna, both physical and mental strain goes hand in hand with the united input of labour. Hence, from dawn till dusk, we cherished every bit of learning.

An obvious question penetrated my mind. Beyond a doubt, the classes are conducted unperturbed throughout the year. But what happens during the monsoons. One of the students showed me some

hamlets, holding plain roof tops. So, even during downpour, lessons roll on unimpaired.

In the one month span I learnt not only the value of bells, queues but also how effectively one could engineer mind and make the best output of time management.

The afternoons just rolled on with practising football, cricket or even drill execution.

For long, I had cherished the desire of visiting the museum of Tagore, to get a glimpse of the many articles used by the noble soul-his shoes, his treasured piano, the different souvenirs accumulated all across the globe during his visits. As I lay my eyes upon them, I couldn't believe myself.

Shantiniketan would not have received huge accolades without the infinite contribution of Nandalal Bose, the Principal of Kala Bhavana, Shantiniketan. His beloved students, Binod Behari Mukherjee, Ramkinkar Baij imbibed modern painting and sculpture. The premises of Shantiniketan hum with the artistic tinges in the statues of Buddha etc saluting the bygone skilled craftsmen.

Gurudev was right.

Nature is the best educator. It is only under the canopy of the big trees accompanied by the soothing breeze and twittering birds that the artistic entity of one comes into force. Tagore had blended all forms of art-painting, sculpting, folk culture with the regular curriculum in a delightful pattern. As I took strolls through the various gatherings where subjects were being conducted, I noticed grace and novelty everywhere. So, a student undergoing any stream would be equipped with not only the academic aspect but would definitely implement the artistic skills that he has been made aware of. I had feared the nuts and bolts of mathematics. But one session of this subject under the foliage of maltilata tree proved me fallacious. I realised that so long the brick and mortar enclosures have only hindered my thought process. Shantiniketan has blessed me with yet another asset-the value of recognising the species of trees. Even now, when I visit reserve forests, I mull over the variety of trees-their appearance, their smell, their bearings etc

Truly the educationists need to dig within and think afresh regarding the teaching methodology.

Poush Mela and Baul

An indispensable component of Shantiniketan is 'Poush Mela' which usually occurs from 23rd of December and continues a week.

'Poush' happens to be one of the months of Bengali calendar and it is also extremely auspicious as it comes loaded with Bengal tradition of cuisines, celebrations etc. Poush Mela is a fair no less popular than The Book Fair or even the Trade Fair held in New Delhi every year. I was amazed to see a huge congregation of multilingual crowd thronging the premises of Shantiniketan.

Maharshi Debendranth, Tagore's father initiated the idea of a fair where people would exhibit their talents in the form of creative arts. Tagore followed his father's footsteps and today this event, is beyond doubt, the most demanding occurrence in Bengal.

Bengali folk songs, popularly the baul sangeet and tribal dances form an undeniable part of Poush Mela. The bauls are the minstrels who usually renounce the worldly pleasures in search of Godliness.

The human philosophy which lurks in the 'baul'songs moved Tagore during his stay in Birbhum, Kushthiya, Bolepur etc in Bengal. Their songs were understandable, retaining the essence of a meaningful life that anybody would feel connected to.

Lalon Phakir is considered the pioneer among the bauls. He composed a number of songs which were orally transmitted through generations. One of them follows below:

Amar praner manush acche prane

Tai heri tai shokol khane

(The man of my heart dwells in me

Everywhere I look it is he.)

Both Tagore and Lalou were in quest of the real truth and that is Almighty. The man of our hearts is none other than God and our futile search for him hither and thither is what is being rendered here. It is amusing to note that Lalou was a self-learned philosopher whose ideas transcended

gender, religion, caste, background and were readily acceptable to the habitual mass. This simplicity

was perhaps what Tagore had yearned for ages—something that would adhere to the wellness of an individual.

When taken a plunge into the fair, one can witness the heterogeneity in Bengal legacy—handicrafts consisting of 'taant', 'batik print', the dances of the 'santhals' (a popular tribe of Birbhum) rhythmic with the 'madala' (an instrument), the dokra costume jewellery and last but not the least, the mouth-smacking delicacies. Tagore, inculcating the literary nectar, had introduced

refined modes of skits called as 'Leto'. 'Letos' depicted the humdrum life amalgamated with humour and satire.

It is true that Rabindranath Tagore was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Many might opine that

it was righteously feasible for him to pursue and cherish his dreams. But Tagore selflessly strove for a noble mission. He struggled tirelessly with a vision to give a modern dimension to education. His concept of classroom-less schools have been later implemented in various parts of India including the Pinakini Satyagraha Ashram (a part of Sabarmati Ashram). Many modern educationists probably have realised the value of open air classrooms and inculcating fine arts into the curriculum.

As I lay down my pen, I am contented that I could sketch the portrait of a Nobel laureate', a great poet and philosopher and above all a revolutionist.

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