

Education, Culture and Sustainability: The Living Tradition of Visva-Bharati

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Abstract

Tagore was one of the earliest educators who envisioned education which was deeply rooted in one's immediate surroundings with connecting to the cultures of the wider world. From the very beginning, Santiniketan was inspired by Tagore on the beliefs of humanism, internationalism and sustainable development with the goal to make its students self-reliant, self-dependent and self-respectful (Sarkar, 1961). The rural paradise of Santiniketan has been a great centre of art, education, human values, cultural interchange and internationalism (Ghosh, 2025). The cultural events and melas of Santiniketan like Poush Utsav, Nandan Mela, Magh Mela, Anand Bazar and Rathindra Mela etc. have great role in social, cultural and economic development of the people and their environmental awareness towards water conservation, tree plantation, soil fertility conservation, using vermin post instead of chemical fertilizers. During these cultural events, the entire campus has a festive environment with baul songs, tribal dances, different instrumentation and other cultural programmes throughout the campus and township which is a great attraction for tourists from West Bengal and different part of the country (Ray, 1995). Thus, these fairs play a significant prosperity and economic empowerment of the people, Strengthening cultural integration and different kinds of handicrafts, social awareness and commitment on different social issues and promote gender equality and women empowerment.

Keywords: Human values, Cultural harmony, Social awareness, Economic empowerment

INTRODUCTION

From a socio-cultural perspective, festivals in Santiniketan reflect traditional ideas of collective gathering and structured social time, distinguishing everyday life from celebration while aligning with seasonal rhythms. Rooted in local practices and community beliefs, these festivals embody grassroots cultural identity through meaningful local elements (Fang et. al, 2025). In the red soil of Birbhum, Rabindranath Tagore transformed the traditional Indian mela from a purely religious or social event into an effective approach of promoting global education and rural development. He Thought that real learning should take place beyond the four walls of a classroom, grounded in the student's immediate environment while remaining open to the diverse cultures of the world. At Visva-Bharati, the "Living Tradition" is best witnessed through these vibrant fairs, which act as a bridge between the university and the rural community.

These festivals are built on the foundational goals of humanism, internationalism, and sustainable development, designed to make students and villagers alike self-reliant and self-respectful. This idea integrates naturally with the concept of UNESCO approach that culture is a primary "enabler and driver"

of economic, social, and environmental advancement. From the commercial activities of Poush Mela to the agricultural innovation of Magh Mela, these get together serve as a functional laboratory for Tagore's philosophy. By combining art, music, and local handicrafts with modern sustainability goals like water conservation and organic farming the Melas of Santiniketan show how cultural heritage can promote a community's prosperity and environmental awareness.

Poush Mela: The Foundation of Regional Prosperity

Poush Mela is an annual fair which takes place in Santiniketan, Birbhum district in the state of West Bengal. According to Bengali Calendar, it commences on the 7th day of the month of Poush when harvest season. Officially this fair lasts for three days but now it last for four or five days. A Bhramha Mandir was established at Santiniketan on 21 December 1891 (7th Poush 1298 according to Bengali calendar). When the Santiniketan Trust Deed was drafted in 1888, it included a provision for a fair. The Poush Mela formally commenced in 1892, on the 7th day of Poush, in the grounds situated to the north of the Brahma Mandir. Poush mela is inaugurated on 7th Poush at dawn, Santiniketan gets up to the soft music of Shehnai. It begins at dawn at the Ashram with singing by the Vaitalik group, followed by a prayer meeting at Chhatimtala, and subsequently, a procession is taken out up to Uttarayan.



A local artisan carving traditional owl at Poush Mela Artisans creating traditional Patachitra paintings at Poush Mela

Poush Mela plays an important role in promoting economic growth at the micro level, particularly in and around Santiniketan and Birbhum. This festival promotes tourism, provides economic opportunities for rural artisans, supports the growth of the hotel industry and local businesses, develops the transport facilities and commercial activities and creates multiple sources of income for residents of in and around Santiniketan in particular and Birbhum in general. Thus it aids in poverty reduction, improves livelihoods and promotes economic prosperity of the region. The fair also raises awareness among rural communities about improving agricultural practices, including activities such as sericulture, poultry farming, livestock farming, and aquaculture.



A folk artisan selling flutes and Ektaras at Poush Mela A mother and her children preserving folk art traditions at the Poush Mela

Spreading environmental awareness such as awareness towards practices like rainwater and pond conservation, maintaining soil fertility, and using vermin compost instead of chemical fertilizers to protect nature and promote sustainable and eco-friendly celebration is an important component of Poush Mela. Awareness programs are organized for backward classes, and various departments of Visva-Bharati fulfil this responsibility through exhibitions. The NSS volunteers of Visva-Bharati also contribute to this initiative through social service camps. This fair helps disseminate awareness regarding social welfare and justice, promotes women's empowerment and gender equality, and provides information about educational opportunities and facilities through various stalls.

During the festival, one witnesses a beautiful glimpse of cultural development, through the promotion of various folk dances as well as traditional folk arts such as Baul, Kavi Gaan, and Putul Nach. Traditional musical instruments like the Dhak and Dhol infuse the festive atmosphere with even greater vibrancy. This fair also promotes local handicrafts, thereby showcasing the skills of the local handicrafts. It empowers the cultural harmony, creativity, and aesthetic values, while simultaneously promoting an esteem and integrity towards one's own profession as well as that of others.

Magh Mela: Agricultural Innovation and Rural Development

Magh Mela expresses the integration of educational outreach and rural empowerment. Officially initiated on February 6, 1922, the festival honours the anniversary of the Institute of Rural Reconstruction founded by Rabindranath Tagore and Leonard Elmhirst. This fair differs from traditional religious Mela, this annual event held from February 6 to February 8 (23rd to 25th Magh) functions as a dynamic educational laboratory. It promotes sustainability by showcasing scientific agricultural innovations alongside traditional handicrafts, such as leatherwork and pottery from Shilpa Sadan. By integrating folk arts like Baul songs and tribal dances as a modern developmental framework, the Utsav ensures that culture remains an active, economic force that sustains the local community rather than a static relic of the past.

It strengthens economic growth of the people of in and around Santiniketan and Sriniketan through small businesses, improved transportation, and increased trade during the Magh Mela. It provides support to rural artisans, traders, and service providers, and contributes to economic development and poverty alleviation. The fair also raises awareness regarding agro-based activities i.e. sericulture, poultry farming, livestock rearing and aquaculture etc. and assists in the development of skilled labour, and boosts both tourism and the local economy.

Environmental awareness: During the Magh Mela, environmental awareness is promoted through

measures such as the conservation of rainwater and ponds, the maintenance of soil fertility, and the fostering of awareness regarding 'Soil Health Cards.' The use of vermicompost is encouraged as an alternative to chemical fertilizers, and soil samples collected from various districts of Birbhum are displayed to disseminate information concerning soil health. During the Magh Mela, cultural development is fostered through traditional folk songs such as Baul and Kavi Gaan—folk dances, and musical instruments like the Dhak and Dhol (Das, 2025). It also encourages handicrafts, promotes cultural harmony and creativity, and upholds dignity and respect for all professions.

Ananda Bazar: Nurturing Self-Reliance in Students

Ananda Bazar is a unique festival organised by the students, assisted by the teachers of the bhavanas of the university. It was started in 1326 B.S. (1991) by the initiatives of Pratima Debi, the daughter-in-law of Rabindranath Tagore. This annual charity fair is held on the day of Mahalaya. This day marks the final working day for the school section prior to the commencement of the autumn holidays. Furthermore, following the fortnight-long 'Shardotsav', it serves as a grand finale of sorts, with the primary objective of connecting with boundless joy (Saha, 2021). The stalls are decorated in a variety of ways at the Gour-Prangana, Santiniketan. Students and the teacher install and run shops selling a variety of earthenware, food, and entertainment items, which are the main attractions of this Bazaar. The profit earned from this Ananda Bazar is donated to the Atma sahayakBhander of the Asramsammilini, Patha Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, for helping needy students.



A vibrant craft stall at the Ananda Bazar in Santiniketan

A lively Bazar seen showcasing

diverse Bengali textile arts

During the Anand Bazaar, students actively participate in various activities to cultivate self-reliance, social responsibility, and self-confidence. This refines their artistic sensibilities and handicraft skills, while also encouraging them to contribute to rural development and assist those in need. Ananda Bazaar helps students acquire knowledge, skills, and a positive attitude. It promotes cultural harmony and preservation, fosters economic understanding, and instils a sense of dignity towards all professions. It also contributes to economic growth by supporting local vendors, food sellers, and stall owners.

Nandan Mela: Art, Recycling, and Social Responsibility

Nandan Mela the annual art fair was organized by prof. Dinkar Koushik of kala-Bhavana, visva-Bharati. It was started on 1 December 1973 and end in 2nd December. Even now it is organized for 2 days. The objective of this Mela was to generated funds for supporting the needy students from kala-Bhavana by selling, they make handmade product like albums lithograph calendars painting appliqué design

terracotta figures handicrafts etc. Puppet show also arranges. Visitors including inmates and art lovers from all over the country came to show the fair.



A creative sculpture display at Nandan Mela in Santiniketan A display of creative bamboo and light installations during Nandan Mela

Nandan Mela, an annual art fair organized by Kala Bhavana of Visva-Bharati, aims to raise funds to assist needy students. It features the display and sale of a diverse range of artistic creations such as paintings, performances, handmade crafts, and recycled art. Students also sell food items here with dignity, thereby fostering creativity and instilling a spirit of repurposing discarded materials.

The Nandan Mela holds economic significance, as it generates revenue and promotes small businesses and tourism in Shantiniketan. It fosters cultural values, harmony, and conservation across the entire country. Furthermore, the fair assists students in developing knowledge, skills, and perspectives, while also raising awareness regarding the sustainable use of resources and recycling for a better environment.

Rathindra Mela

Rathindra Mela, the annual handicrafts fair, is organised by the Sriniketan Karmi Sangha in collaboration with Silpa-Sadana, Visva-Bharati, on 27th November at the Silpa-Sadana premises, on account of the birth anniversary of Rathindranath Tagore. This is a one-day mela that runs from 2 p.m. to 8 p.m. Handicraft workers and women with various products participate, and their products are displayed for sale. Now there are also some cultural programmes held. Visva-Bharati staff, students, and visitors are the main buyers in this fair.

Conclusion

The living tradition of Visva-Bharati shows that when education incorporates with culture and economic activity with the community it becomes more effective because it is not only limited into the four walls of the classrooms (Mukherjee & Roy, 2025). According to UNESCO, culture is both a promoter and motivator of economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development. Central to this philosophy of 'Mela' (fair), doesn't acts at just a festive get-together but a functional laboratory for Rabindranath Tagore's ideals of humanism, internationalism, and sustainable development. Through events like Poush Mela, Magh Mela, Nandan Mela and Rathindra Mela, the university successfully bridges the gap between academic theory and rural reality, fostering a sense of Atmashakti (self-reliance) among students and villagers alike. These fairs act as powerful drivers for the 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) through economic empowerment, environmental conservation, and the preservation of traditional art forms like Baul music and Dokra handicrafts while encouraging the social justice by ensuring gender equality, women's empowerment, and the rights of marginalized

communities.

In essence, the Melas of Santiniketan show the culture as a crucial factor for sustainability. By celebrating the harmony between humanity and nature through its festivals and fairs, Visva-Bharati upholds an educational philosophy that nurtures every facet of human development while honouring the past, actively constructs a self-reliant and environmentally conscious future. Thus Visva-Bharati played an important role for those programmes practicing in Santiniketan since decades to fulfilment and preserving the Tagore's ideas and philosophy and also for Educational for sustainable Development.

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