

Rabindranath Tagore's Thoughts and Actions on Physical Education Sports and Peace

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore, a visionary philosopher and educator, emphasized the vital role of physical education and sports in promoting peace and social cohesion. His unique approach integrated physical development with intellectual and emotional growth, aiming to create well-rounded individuals who could actively participate in and enhance the well-being of society. Tagore's educational institutions, such as Visva-Bharati, embodied his philosophy, where physical activities were not merely recreational but were seen as essential for holistic human development. Present research investigates Tagore's thoughts and actions on the integration of physical education and sports with his broader ideals of peace, humanism, and global harmony. Present article examines how his educational practices and the role of sports in his pedagogy provided insightful learning in the overall character and personality development of children. Further, the current review searched the significance of physical training and sports culture in Tagore's childhood and later life. This investigation highlights how he infused physical education and sports through his literary work on poem, poetry, music and drama. Through this exploration, the present article emphasizes the relevance of Tagore's ideas in contemporary discussions on peace, education, and the role of sports in promoting global unity.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Physical Education, Sports, Peacebuilding, Educational Philosophy.

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INTRODUCTION

The loss and absence of peace in today's world is a serious concern. Violence, social inequality, environmental damage, and rising conflicts are harming the well-being of people across nations. According to the Global Peace Index, the global level of peacefulness has been deteriorating, with a 0.42% decrease in 2023 (Institute for Economics & Peace: Global Peace Index-2023). Restoration of peace is crucial for sustaining the well-being of this planet and the welfare of humanity. Promoting peace can bring people together, reduce hatred, and build understanding. Like many other means, Sports can play an important role in this process. It helps people learn how to cooperate, respect others, and work as a team.

Sport is not only about winning or losing. It teaches valuable life lessons like discipline, fairness, and managing emotions. When people from different backgrounds play together, they learn to respect differences and share common goals. These experiences

help reduce anger and promote peace at both the personal and community levels (Martín-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2024).

In a world marked by conflict, division, and growing inequality, sports have emerged as an important platform for promoting peace, unity, and social transformation and social integration by bringing together people of different races, religions, and cultures. According to UNESCO (Gilbert and Bennett, 2012), sports-based programs have been implemented in over 90 countries to support peace-building and reconciliation processes.

Sports also promote conflict resolution. Through rules, fair play, and mutual goals, athletes learn to resolve disagreements without violence. In regions like Rwanda and Bosnia, community sports programs after ethnic conflicts have helped rebuild trust between divided communities. The Peace and Sport Organization reported that in post-conflict zones, 75% of participants in sports initiatives showed improvement in positive attitudes toward former enemies (Nataliia & Maiia,

2024). Furthermore, sports act as a universal language for cultural diplomacy. Global events like the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup unite nations and promote dialogue. The FIFA Fair Play campaign has raised awareness on sportsmanship, inclusion, and mutual respect globally (Serrano-Dura *et al.*, 2021).

Sports also support mental health, encourage social inclusion, and help young people stay away from harmful activities. That is why global organizations like the United Nations promote sport as a tool to build peace, improve education, and heal divided communities. Sporting events like the Olympics show how people from different nations can come together in the spirit of friendship. According to UNESCO, over 80% of countries now include sports-based programs in their peace and development strategies (Gadais, 2019). The UN observes April 6th as the International Day of Sport for Development of Peace, recognizing its ability to break down barriers and build bridges across cultures and conflicts. Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games, believed that sport was a tool for peace and international friendship. His Olympic ideals were based on mutual respect and peaceful competition.

Many philosophers and leaders have emphasised the significance and powerful role of physical activity and sports in shaping moral character and promoting unity and peace across the world. Nelson Mandela highlighted the transformative power of sports in post-apartheid South Africa. He once said, “Sport has the power to change the world... It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does” (Chari, 2017). Plato, the Greek philosopher, believed that physical training (gymnastics) and intellectual development must go hand in hand for a harmonious life. In his work *The Republic*, he proposed that a just society requires balanced individuals, and sports were key to cultivating discipline, courage, and harmony between body and soul. He also supported physical education and believed that a healthy body helps in building a healthy mind and a good society (Simon, 2015; Casimir, 2013). Aristotle also emphasized the importance of physical activity for citizenship and virtue. He saw sports as a means to develop self-control, fairness, and endurance—qualities essential for peaceful and ethical living. John Paul Lederach, a modern peacebuilding scholar, emphasized the importance of cultural tools including sports in building “moral imagination” and relationships in conflict zones (Lederach, 2004). Sports, according to Lederach, create shared experiences that lay the foundation for reconciliation and long-term peace (Reid, 2022).

The Indian great freedom fighter Mahatma Gandhi believed in non-violence and peaceful ways to solve problems and often spoke about self-control and discipline, which are qualities also learned through sports (Dey, 2021). The great Indian philosopher and poet Rabindranath Tagore believed that real education should help a person grow in body, mind, and soul. In his

schools, he gave importance to games, nature walks, and physical activity as part of daily life. He saw sports as a way to build self-confidence, cooperation, and inner balance and peace (Kundu, 2010).

Together, these philosophical insights and modern actions highlight how sports continue to serve as a meaningful tool for promoting peace, building character, and strengthening communities worldwide.

The aim of this article was to explore the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore’s ideas and practices of physical education and sports to promote peace. It also tries to connect his thoughts with present-day efforts across the world, to show how physical education can help create a more peaceful and united society.

Rabindranath Tagore: Early Life and Context with a View on Sports Culture

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Asia’s first Nobel Laureate in Literature (1913), was a poet, philosopher, musician, and social reformer who contributed greatly to education and cultural renewal in India. Born in the Jorasanko Thakur Bari in Calcutta (now Kolkata), West Bengal, the eastern state of India, Tagore grew up in a progressive Bengali Brahmo family deeply engaged in literature, music, theatre, and social reforms. His early education was largely home-based, with exposure to both Indian classical traditions and Western liberal ideas (Bhattacharya, 2013). A strong influence came from his father, Debendranath Tagore, who valued spiritual development and open-minded learning (Haq, 2010).

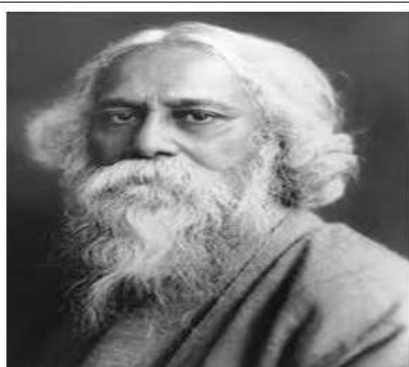
Though formal education did not suit him, Tagore was highly observant and experiential in his learning. His visits to the different places and natural surroundings during his youth helped him develop a deep connection with nature later reflected in his educational philosophy. He believed education should be rooted in freedom, creativity, and a connection with the physical world, including the importance of bodily movement and physical culture (Dasgupta, 1993).

During Tagore’s early years, the prevailing sports culture in Bengal was minimal in the formal sense, but traditional Indian physical activities like wrestling (*kushti*), yoga, and indigenous games such as *kabaddi* and *gilli-danda* were common in rural and semi-urban life (Bandyopadhyay & Das, 2025). While urban British colonial influence introduced cricket and football to elite schools, Tagore witnessed the growing divide between body-centric colonial drills and the spiritual-mental focus of traditional Indian education. He felt a lack of balance in this system.

By the late 19th century, physical education was introduced in India primarily for military training or health reform, but Tagore took a broader view. He recognized that sports and physical activity should

develop the whole person—physically, mentally, and morally. His early writings and school experiences reflect concern for mechanical education and a desire to create an environment where students could learn

through action, movement, and engagement with nature laying the foundation for his future reforms at Shantiniketan (Lesar, 2015).



Rabindranath Tagore

Physical Activity and Sports in Tagore's Life

Though Rabindranath Tagore was not an athlete in the conventional sense, he placed high importance on physical activity as an essential part of holistic education. His exposure to global educational models during his travels to Europe, the USA, and Japan significantly shaped his perception of the role of the body in learning. He observed that in countries like Japan, physical training was not just about health but was embedded in discipline, national pride, and character development (Lesar, 2015).

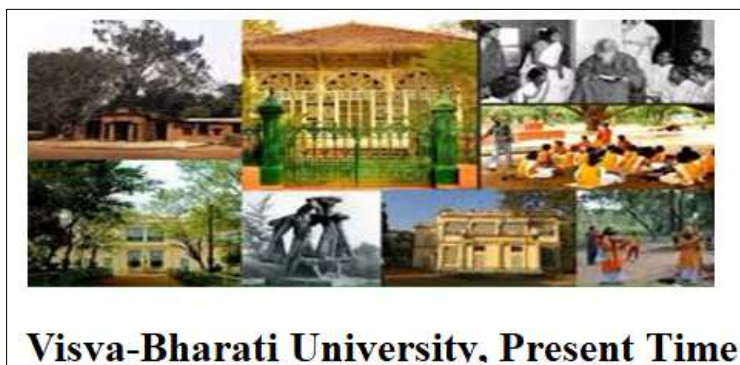
Tagore believed that true education nurtures the body, along with the mind and spirit. He often emphasized that “education divorced from nature and physical movement leads to a mechanical life.” While living in Shantiniketan, he practiced yoga and encouraged its inclusion in the daily routines of students. Physical activities such as tree climbing, gardening, swimming in the Kopai River, and long walks were made part of the learning environment. These were not just recreational but purposeful in developing self-confidence, balance, and a sense of connection with nature (Fraser, 2019).

Tagore's school at Shantiniketan regularly organized sports meets, football matches, and indigenous games like *kabaddi* and *lathi khela* (stick fighting), involving both students and teachers. The Shantiniketan extension also included physical labour and agricultural work as part of vocational education, emphasizing dignity in physical effort (Kupfer, n.d.).

By integrating physical culture into the educational routine, Tagore aimed to develop fearless, balanced individuals. His vision aligns with the WHO's modern definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease (Mukherjee, 2021).

Tagore's Actions to Promote Physical Education and Sports

Rabindranath Tagore's vision of education extended far beyond textbooks and classrooms. He believed in developing the “complete human being” by integrating physical activity, creativity, and intellectual growth. His practical implementation of this vision was most visible in his institutions at Shantiniketan and Sriniketan.



Visva-Bharati University, Present Time

At **Shantiniketan**, Tagore created a learning environment rooted in nature and movement. Daily routines included games, yoga, dance, drama, and outdoor exploration. He believed that physical activity was as important as academic learning. Tagore once said, “Let the children run free in the fields, and feel the joy of

movement, for it is in motion that they discover the rhythm of life.” Sports and games were used to instill discipline, cooperation, and self-confidence. Understanding the value of martial arts, he even brought a *Jujutsu* expert from Japan to train students in physical discipline (Bhattacharya, 2013).



Visva-Bharati University, Traditional Education System

Visva-Bharati University, founded in 1921, was Tagore’s international institution where physical education remained a vital component. Apart from arts and academics, students participated in sports and community activities, promoting body-mind harmony. Cultural and sporting exchanges were encouraged, reflecting his belief in unity through shared physical expression and global cooperation (Dasgupta, 1993).

Siksha-Satra, a school established in 1924 at Sriniketan for rural children, went further in applying his philosophy. The school was operated like a self-sufficient community. Apart from academics, students learned crafts like weaving, carpentry, and bookbinding. Physical education included games, sports, Brati-Balaka activities (scouting-like training), gardening, sanitation, and educational excursions. The aim was to build physical strength, practical skills, and community values (Bhattacharya, 2014).

Additionally, Siksha-Charcha Bhavana trained rural primary school teachers in both theoretical and practical education, including one compulsory village craft. This model emphasized hands-on learning and the physical aspects of teaching (Martín-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2024).

Tagore’s View on Sports and Peace

Tagore saw sports not merely as a source of physical training, but as a path to developing moral strength, social harmony, and inner balance. In his educational philosophy, sports played an important role in developing a holistic individual capable of making meaningful contributions to society. He viewed physical activity as a medium to express freedom, encourage self-discipline, and promote collective well-being.

In a world increasingly marked by division and conflict, Tagore believed that sports could bridge social and cultural gaps. He emphasized values such as teamwork, fairness, and mutual respect—qualities that are foundational for peaceful coexistence. “Peace,” he noted, “is not the mere absence of war, but the presence of harmony in the hearts of people.” His integration of sports into school life was a conscious effort to instill these values in young minds (Sarkar, 2023).

In his poem “*Ananda Dhara Bohichhe Bhubane*” (Joy flows through the world), Tagore celebrates the joy of movement and life. The imagery reflects how physical activity, including games and sports, connects human beings with nature and each other, bringing about inner joy and social unity.

Global data supports Tagore’s vision. According to UNESCO, over 70 countries now implement sport-based peacebuilding programs in schools and conflict-prone communities. In places like Colombia, Liberia, and Sri Lanka, sport-based education has shown measurable reductions in youth violence and increased community dialogue (Meskill, 2018). These examples resonate with Tagore’s belief that sports are not just games—they are instruments of human connection, development, and enduring peace.

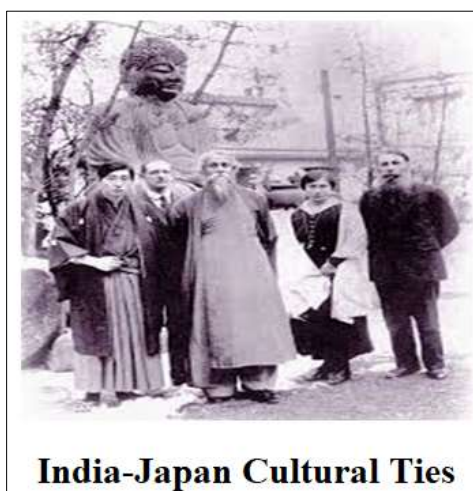
Tagore’s Admiration to Japanese Culture and Martial Arts

Rabindranath Tagore’s journeys to Japan, particularly in 1916, deeply influenced his educational and philosophical outlook. He admired Japan’s harmonious blend of traditional values with modern discipline and recognized the nation’s emphasis on physical training as a pillar of national identity and social cohesion. Tagore was especially impressed by the role of

martial arts like jujutsu and kendo in Japanese schools (Bharucha, 2006), which he saw as vehicles for cultivating inner strength, respect, and unity.

Tagore believed that Japan's disciplined way of life, rooted in aesthetics and physical culture, played a significant role in its peaceful social structure. He wrote extensively about Japan in his essays compiled in "Letters from Japan" (Japan Jatri), where he praised the country's commitment to collective harmony and moral strength. In this collection, Tagore admired how Japanese children learned to respect elders, work in unison, and maintain cleanliness — all of which, he

noted, were reinforced through school-based physical activity. Inspired by this model, Tagore invited Japanese martial arts instructors to Shantiniketan, incorporating their methods into the physical education curriculum. Historical records from Visva-Bharati University during the 1920s confirm that such exchanges led to structured physical training, enhancing both bodily health and character development among students. Tagore saw Japan not merely as a nation, but as a model of cultural strength rooted in disciplined living (Bharucha, 2006). His efforts to blend Indian and Japanese educational ideals were a step toward a peaceful, inclusive global culture.



Rabindranath Tagore's Vision of Physical Activity in Life and Literature

Rabindranath Tagore gave deep importance to physical activity, not just as exercise but as a vital part of life, learning, and inner development. He beautifully blended this idea into his literary creations, personal life, and educational philosophy.

His poems, such as *Khela*, *Master Babu*, *Brishti Pade Tapur Tupur*, *Question*, *Banaphool*, *Putulbhanga*, *Vaat Nei Dush Ek Ratti*, and *Har*, reflect the joy, rhythm, and freedom of physical movement. These poems show that for Tagore, play and physical expression were meaningful ways of understanding life (Mandal, 2000).

In addition, works like *Shishu* (The Child) celebrate the joy of spontaneous childhood movement, while the short story *Chhuti* (The Holiday) shows how physical play in nature supports emotional and intellectual growth. In his essay *Siksar Herfer* (Mistakes in Education), Tagore criticized rigid education systems and called for experiential learning, including games, exercises, and nature walks, to develop the body and mind together (Dasgupta, 2021). These writings reflect his deep belief that physical activity is central to education and life.

In his autobiographical works *Jibansmriti* (My Reminiscences) and *Chhelebel* (My Boyhood Days),

Tagore described how his father and grandfather encouraged bravery, open-air experiences, and physical exploration in his childhood. These experiences shaped his lifelong belief in the connection between body, mind, and soul (Dasgupta, 1993).

His essays, like *Play and Work*, *Exercise*, *Entrepreneurial Education*, *Meditating Japan*, and *Yoga* show a clear vision of physical education as part of holistic human growth. He promoted discipline, freedom, and creativity through physical training, which became a key part of his model at Shantiniketan.

Tagore's stories and songs also carried these values. In *Munshi*, he humorously shared his love for tennis. *Atithi* recalled gymnastics from his boyhood. Characters like Indranath in *Char Adhyaya* and themes in *Gora* highlight physical courage and national spirit. His dance-dramas and plays such as *Chirakumar Sabha*, *Heyalinatya*, *Aruparatan*, *Prayaschitta*, *Falguni*, *Dakghar*, and *Kukut*, used dance and performance to express human emotions and social issues through movement (Mandal, 2000).

His letters to Indira Devi and Maharaja Radhamanikya Dev mentioned rural life and children's games. In letters to Mohit Chandra Sen of the Shantiniketan School, Tagore stressed the importance of physical health, good food, and regular exercise.

He also promoted these ideas in public speeches, calling for a life that balanced physical and mental wellbeing. At Shantiniketan, games like *Suhridkapa* and *Shishukapa*, and matches with Mohun Bagan were organized, with trained teachers and reward systems (Mandal, 2000).

Few writers in world literature have so deeply connected physical activity with both personal life and creativity. Tagore's ideas of peace and physical development still inspire people today. In thought and action, he remains a rare and timeless figure.

Tagore's thought: Key Principles Holistic Development

Tagore's belief in holistic education was grounded in the inseparable nature of the body, mind, and spirit. He argued that physical vitality is indispensable for the fullest development of the soul. This view is clearly expressed in his essay "The Education of the Human Race," where he writes, "*Physical vitality is necessary for the fullest development of the soul.*" In Tagore's educational philosophy, a strong, healthy body provided the foundation for intellectual and emotional growth (Bhattacharjee, 2014). This concept was reflected in his schools, where physical education was just as important as intellectual pursuits.

Experiential Learning

For Tagore, education was not confined to classrooms or textbooks; it was an immersive, hands-on experience. Games, outdoor activities, travel, and direct engagement with nature were central to his educational methods. His schools in Shantiniketan emphasized experiential learning, where students were encouraged to learn through active participation (Das and Bera, 2020). Tagore believed that interaction with the natural world and physical movement were key to cultivating empathy, creativity, and intellectual curiosity.

Social Harmony and Peace

Tagore's pedagogical approach was deeply rooted in his vision of social harmony and peace. He believed that education should promote nonviolence, inclusion, and mutual respect. He envisioned a system that transcended colonial divisions, emphasizing human unity and global citizenship. Tagore's vision aligned with his broader philosophical principles of universal love and peace. As expressed in his poem "*Ananda Dhara Bohichhe Bhubane*", he believed that peace was not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of harmony in the hearts of individuals (Dasgupta, 1993). Physical activities, for Tagore, were essential for cultivating this harmony, as they fostered cooperation, empathy, and a collective sense of well-being (Malaviya, 2020).

Tagore's thoughts and actions related to physical activity and education remain highly relevant today. His ideas underscore the importance of integrating

mind, body, and spirit in educational practices and provide a strong foundation for using sports and physical activities as tools for peacebuilding and personal development.

CONCLUSION

Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy on physical education and sports holds a profound relevance in today's world, where violence, division, and conflict are increasingly prominent. Tagore recognized that sports are not merely competitive activities but powerful tools for fostering peace, building character, and promoting mutual respect across different communities. In his vision, physical activity was not just about achieving physical fitness or winning a game, but about nurturing the qualities of cooperation, empathy, and fairness—values essential for peaceful coexistence in a fragmented world.

Through his progressive educational model at Shantiniketan and later at Visva-Bharati, Tagore integrated physical education with intellectual and spiritual growth, creating a holistic approach to learning. He advocated for a balanced development of the body, mind, and spirit, where sports played a critical role in strengthening this unity. The idea that a sound body contributes to a sound mind and spirit was central to his educational philosophy, which emphasized experiential learning, social harmony, and nonviolence.

In today's context, where global challenges such as inequality, environmental degradation, and rising conflicts threaten peace, Tagore's vision remains a beacon of hope. His belief in intercultural exchange through sports, as seen in his admiration for Japan's martial arts culture and his invitation of Japanese instructors, highlights the universal language of sports as a means of bridging divides and promoting international understanding.

Ultimately, Tagore's educational and philosophical approach underscores that peace-building begins from within, through each individual's discipline, respect for others, and understanding of their shared humanity. By promoting physical education as an essential part of learning, fostering empathy, and encouraging cooperation, Tagore's legacy offers invaluable insights into how sports can contribute to a peaceful, harmonious world. His timeless philosophy remains as important today as it was in his time, inspiring current and future generations to integrate the transformative power of physical activity into their lives.

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