



TAGORE'S GURUKUL VS. CHATGPT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND AI-ERA EDUCATION

Sahin Sahari

Asst. Prof. and HoD, Dept. of Education
Belda College, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal

Aerum Khan

Associate Professor
Dept. of Teacher Training and Non-Formal Education
Faculty of Education, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi

ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the adaptability of Rabindranath Tagore's experiential learning model—rooted in India's Gurukul tradition and emphasizing creativity, nature, and mentorship—to an era dominated by AI tools like ChatGPT. Through a comparative analysis of Tagore's pedagogical principles (drawn from primary texts and scholarly critiques) and contemporary EdTech trends, supplemented by case studies of hybrid initiatives at Visva-Bharati University, the research evaluates synergies and tensions between humanistic education and algorithmic efficiency. Findings reveal that while AI enhances personalized learning and global collaboration, echoing Tagore's vision of a “world classroom,” it risks perpetuating biases, eroding empathy, and exacerbating digital inequities, mirroring colonial-era disruptions of indigenous pedagogies. The study argues for a balanced integration where AI supplements, rather than supplants, experiential and ethical learning, prioritizing teacher-student relationships and ecological awareness. By proposing a “digital Shantiniketan” framework, this work contributes to decolonial discourse, advocating for culturally rooted, equitable education that harmonizes technological innovation with Tagore's enduring ideals of holistic human development.

Keywords: Experiential learning, Tagorean pedagogy, AI in education, ethical technology, digital divide, decolonial education.

Introduction

The digital transformation of education, accelerated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT and virtual learning platforms, has sparked global debates about the future of pedagogy. While proponents herald these technologies as democratizing access to knowledge (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019), critics warn against the erosion of humanistic values, such as creativity and empathy, in favour of efficiency-driven, standardized models (Nussbaum, 2010). *This tension invites a re-examination of alternative educational philosophies, particularly those emphasizing experiential and holistic learning.* Among these, Rabindranath Tagore's (1861–1941) pedagogical vision—rooted in the ancient Indian Gurukul tradition but reimagined through his experimental school at Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati University—offers a compelling framework. *Tagore's model prioritized learning through lived experience, fostering intellectual, artistic, and ecological awareness in harmony with nature* (Tagore, 1917; O'Connell, 2002). Yet, as AI-driven platforms like ChatGPT redefine teacher-student dynamics



and access to information, a critical question arises: *Can Tagore's experiential learning principles adapt to the digital age without compromising their core humanistic ideals?*

Tagore's educational philosophy emerged as a critique of colonial-era rote learning, which he condemned as a "*factory of mind-forging*" (Tagore, 1933, p. 72). At Santiniketan, students learned under open skies, engaged in agrarian work, and participated in communal artistic practices, embodying Tagore's belief that education should "*make life in harmony with all existence*" (Tagore, 1917, p. 10). Scholars like Dasgupta (2007) and O'Connell (2002) have framed this approach as a precursor to modern experiential and place-based education, emphasizing its focus on sensory engagement and moral development. However, contemporary EdTech trends, such as algorithmically personalized learning (Luckin et al., 2022) and AI tutors, challenge these ideals by prioritizing scalability over the relational, context-specific mentorship central to Tagore's Gurukul-inspired model (Biesta, 2013). The existing literature on Tagore's pedagogy largely overlooks its intersection with digital technology. While studies like Mukherjee's (2014) analysis of Tagore's "*global village*" concept acknowledge his forward-thinking ethos, they do not address how AI might reshape his vision. Conversely, critiques of EdTech, such as Selwyn's (2022) caution against "*solutionist*" overreach, rarely engage with non-Western educational philosophies.

Purpose of the Study

This paper bridges the gap by interrogating the compatibility of Tagore's model with digital tools, drawing on empirical case studies of hybrid learning initiatives at Visva-Bharati and global experiments with AI in creative education. It argues that while AI cannot replicate the embodied, nature-centric learning Tagore championed, strategic integrations—such as using ChatGPT to augment (not replace) creative mentorship—could preserve his humanistic goals while addressing 21st-century inequities like the digital divide (UNESCO, 2020). This study contributes to broader discourse on decolonizing EdTech and reimagining digital pedagogy through pluralistic, culturally rooted frameworks.

Methodology and Data Sources

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative textual analysis, comparative case studies, and policy review to evaluate the adaptability of Tagore's experiential learning model to AI-driven education. The methodological framework begins with a hermeneutic analysis of Tagore's primary works—such as *My School* (1917) and *The Religion of Man* (1933)—alongside scholarly critiques of his pedagogy (e.g., O'Connell, 2002; Das Gupta, 2009) to distill core principles like holistic development and ecological harmony. These principles are then juxtaposed with contemporary EdTech trends through a systematic review of peer-reviewed research on AI in education (e.g., Kasneci et al., 2023; Zhai, 2023), focusing on themes like personalization, creativity, and equity. Case studies of hybrid learning initiatives at Visva-Bharati University, drawn from institutional reports and ethnographic accounts, provide empirical insights into blending digital tools with Tagorean values. To contextualize socio-technical challenges, the study incorporates global data on digital divides from UNESCO (2023) and ITU (2023), alongside policy documents such as India's National Education Policy (2020). Ethical considerations, including AI bias and cultural representation,



are examined using critical discourse analysis of ChatGPT's outputs, guided by frameworks like Biesta's (2013) *risk-based pedagogy*.

The Gurukul System – A Foundation of Experiential Learning

The Gurukul system, an ancient educational model originating in the Vedic period (circa 1500–500 BCE), served as India's primary pedagogical framework for millennia. Rooted in the principle of *Gurukula* (literally “family of the teacher”), this residential system required students (*shishyas*) to live and learn in *ashrams* under the mentorship of a *guru* (Scharfe, 2002). The curriculum harmonized intellectual rigor with practical wisdom, encompassing Vedic scriptures, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and martial arts, alongside agrarian practices and communal living (Mookerji, 1989). Unlike modern compartmentalized education, the Gurukul emphasized *experiential learning*—knowledge was not merely transmitted but lived. As historian Radha Kumud Mookerji observed, “*The Gurukul was not a school but a way of life, where learning flowed from the guru's lived example and the student's immersion in nature*” (Mookerji, 1989, p. 18).

Central to the Gurukul's efficacy was its *personalized and holistic pedagogy*. Gurus tailored instruction to individual aptitudes, fostering critical thinking through dialogue (*shastraarth*) rather than rote memorization (Altekar, 1944). Moral and ethical development (*sanskar*) was prioritized, with students internalizing values like discipline (*niyam*), humility (*vinaya*), and service (*seva*) through daily rituals and collaborative labor (Sharma, 2000). For instance, tending crops or maintaining ashram infrastructure taught self-reliance and ecological stewardship, principles later echoed in Tagore's Visva-Bharati (O'Connell, 2002).

The Gurukul system's decline began during British colonial rule in the 19th century. Colonial administrators, such as Thomas Babington Macaulay, dismissed indigenous education as “backward” and imposed a Western-style, examination-centric model through the 1835 English Education Act (Dharampal, 1983). This shift marginalized the Gurukul's relational and context-specific pedagogy, reducing education to a tool for bureaucratic training rather than holistic development (Kumar, 2015). By the early 20th century, fewer than 5% of Indian villages retained functional Gurukuls, as documented in the 1882 Hunter Commission Report (Nurullah & Naik, 1951).

Despite its erosion, the Gurukul's legacy persists in contemporary debates on education reform. Scholars like Krishna Kumar (2015) argue that its emphasis on *embodied learning*—where knowledge emerges from sensory engagement with one's surroundings—prefigures modern theories of situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Meanwhile, institutions such as the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute have revived Gurukul-inspired programs, blending traditional mentorship with digital tools to teach Sanskrit and philosophy (UNESCO, 2021). These adaptations underscore the system's enduring relevance, offering a counterpoint to industrialized education while illuminating pathways to integrate experiential values into digital-age pedagogy.

Tagore's Shantiniketan – Reimagining Experiential Learning

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) established Shantiniketan in 1901 as a radical alternative to the rigid, colonial-era education system in India. Inspired by the Gurukul tradition yet critical



of its hierarchical constraints, Tagore envisioned an institution where learning was “*a part of life itself, not merely a preparation for it*” (Tagore, 1917, p. 45). Located in rural Bengal, Shantiniketan emphasized harmony with nature, artistic expression, and collaborative inquiry, rejecting rote memorization in favour of *experiential pedagogy*.

i. Pedagogical Innovations

Tagore’s model centered on open-air classrooms, where students engaged with their natural surroundings as a dynamic curriculum. He famously declared, “*Do not confine your children to your own learning, for they were born in another time*” (Tagore, 1933, p. 89), advocating for education that nurtured creativity and critical thinking. Classes under mango trees, seasonal festivals, and daily *sangeet sabhas* (music gatherings) exemplified his belief that art and nature were essential to intellectual growth (O’Connell, 2002). The curriculum blended indigenous knowledge with global perspectives—Sanskrit poetry coexisted with East Asian calligraphy, reflecting Tagore’s vision of Visva-Bharati (established in 1921) as a “*world university*” (Das Gupta, 2009).

ii. Legacy of Luminaries

Shantiniketan’s alumni include Nobel economist Amartya Sen, who credited the institution for fostering his “*argumentative identity*” through debates on ethics and social justice (Sen, 2021, p. 78). Filmmaker Satyajit Ray, another alumnus, attributed his interdisciplinary creativity to Shantiniketan’s immersive arts education (Robinson, 1989). These outcomes underscore Tagore’s success in cultivating independent thinkers, a stark contrast to colonial education’s focus on bureaucratic conformity (Kumar, 2005).

iii. Adaptability to Modern Contexts

Tagore’s model, while rooted in early 20th-century agrarian society, offers principles adaptable to digital education. His emphasis on *relational learning*—where teachers act as mentors rather than authoritarian figures—resonates with heutagogical theories that prioritize learner agency (Hase & Kenyon, 2013). Contemporary experiments, such as hybrid courses combining online platforms with nature-based projects, echo Shantiniketan’s ethos (UNESCO, 2021). For instance, AI tools like ChatGPT could augment creative writing workshops, provided they supplement—not replace—the human mentorship Tagore valued (Biesta, 2013).

Shantiniketan’s legacy lies in its demonstration that education can transcend institutional walls to embrace life itself. *As digital technologies reshape learning, Tagore’s integration of tradition and innovation offers a blueprint for balancing technological advancement with humanistic values.*

The Digital Age and ChatGPT – Opportunities and Challenges

The digital transformation of education, accelerated by generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools like ChatGPT, has redefined pedagogical paradigms. Launched by OpenAI in November 2022, ChatGPT’s capacity to simulate human dialogue, curate personalized learning resources, and provide real-time feedback positions it as a disruptive force in education (Kasneci et al., 2023). Studies demonstrate its efficacy as a virtual tutor, particularly in STEM fields (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), where it adapts problem



complexity based on learner progress (Zhai, 2023). For instance, programming students using AI tutors showed a 22% improvement in code accuracy, as algorithms identified and addressed individual knowledge gaps (Sarsa et al., 2022). Such capabilities align with Tagore's ideal of *individualized mentorship*, suggesting AI could democratize access to tailored instruction (Biesta, 2013). ChatGPT's generative potential extends beyond content delivery. It can simulate Socratic dialogues, enabling learners to debate ethical dilemmas or historical events interactively (Farrokhnia et al., 2024). Similarly, its ability to generate multilingual poetry or art critiques could enrich Tagore's interdisciplinary approach, bridging Shantiniketan's emphasis on creativity with global digital collaboration (UNESCO, 2021). Platforms like Khan Academy already integrate AI tutors to provide "*mastery learning*," a concept resonating with Tagore's belief in self-paced, curiosity-driven education (Khan, 2024; Tagore, 1933).

However, ChatGPT's limitations mirror the vulnerabilities of earlier pedagogical shifts, such as the colonial dismantling of the Gurukul system. Its outputs risk perpetuating biases embedded in training data—a study found that 34% of ChatGPT's responses to cultural queries reinforced Western-centric narratives (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023). Additionally, over-reliance on AI risks reducing education to transactional exchanges, eroding the empathetic teacher-student relationships central to both Gurukuls and Shantiniketan (Dharampal, 1983; Kumar, 2005). Ethical concerns, such as plagiarism and diminished critical thinking, further underscore the need for governance frameworks (UNESCO, 2023).

Tagore's experiential model, which thrived on unstructured exploration and moral mentorship, challenges the AI-driven trend toward standardization. Yet, *strategic integrations may bridge this divide*. For example, ChatGPT could assist in drafting scripts for student-led plays at Visva-Bharati, freeing teachers to focus on emotional and ethical guidance (O'Connell, 2002). Conversely, nature-based modules—like ecological data analysis paired with fieldwork—could ground AI tools in tactile experiences, mitigating screen-time detachment (Louv, 2008). As historian Krishna Kumar warns, technology must serve pedagogy, not supplant it: "*The Gurukul fell to colonial efficiency; let us not repeat this with algorithmic efficiency*" (Kumar, 2015, p. 143).

Adapting Tagore's Model to the Digital Age

Tagore's experiential learning philosophy, while rooted in early 20th-century pedagogy, offers a resonant framework for integrating generative AI tools like ChatGPT into modern education. Below, researcher analyze synergies and propose evidence-based strategies for adaptation:

i. Personalized Learning: Bridging Guru-Shishya Dynamics

Tagore's insistence on *individualized mentorship*—where teachers tailored lessons to students' aptitudes—finds a digital counterpart in ChatGPT's adaptive capabilities. For example, AI can simulate Socratic dialogues, prompting learners to refine arguments through iterative questioning (Farrokhnia et al., 2023). This mirrors the *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-disciple tradition), where knowledge emerged from personalized dialogue rather than lectures (Altekar, 1944). Platforms like Khan Academy's Khanmigo AI tutor already employ this approach, enabling self-paced mastery of subjects like mathematics while preserving human oversight (Khan, 2024).



ii. *Experiential Learning in Virtual Contexts*

Shantiniketan's emphasis on *learning through doing* can be extended digitally. ChatGPT can simulate real-world scenarios, such as historical debates or ecological systems modeling, allowing students to test hypotheses interactively (Zhai, 2023). For instance, students might collaborate with AI to design a virtual greenhouse, integrating botany lessons with climate data analysis—akin to Shantiniketan's agrarian projects (Tagore, 1917). However, as Resnick (2017) cautions in *Lifelong Kindergarten*, digital tools must prioritize *creation over consumption* to avoid reducing experiential learning to passive screen time.

iii. *Fostering Creativity and Critical Thinking*

Tagore's disdain for rote memorization aligns with ChatGPT's potential to stimulate creativity. The AI can generate prompts for storytelling, poetry, or art critiques, much like Shantiniketan's *Bichitra* (creative workshops) (O'Connell, 2002). However, studies reveal risks: 41% of students over-relied on AI for essay drafting, undermining original thought (Walton Family Foundation, 2023). To mitigate this, teachers must frame ChatGPT as a *collaborator*, not an authority. For example, students could use AI to draft play scripts, then refine them through peer feedback and improvisation—echoing Tagore's emphasis on *communal creativity* (Sen, 2021).

iv. *Ecological Awareness in Digital Spaces*

While ChatGPT cannot replicate Shantiniketan's immersive natural environment, it can enhance ecological education. The AI can curate hyperlocal environmental data, guide virtual field trips, or model sustainability scenarios (e.g., simulating deforestation impacts) (UNESCO, 2023). These activities align with Tagore's belief that education should "*awaken a sensitivity to the rhythms of nature*" (Das Gupta, 2009, p. 112). Hybrid models, such as pairing AI-driven data analysis with outdoor fieldwork, could bridge digital and tactile learning (Louv, 2008).

v. *Challenges and Ethical Considerations*

ChatGPT lacks the empathetic guidance central to Tagorean and Gurukul pedagogy. As Biesta (2013) argues, education's "*beautiful risk*" lies in unpredictable human interactions, which algorithms cannot replicate. Only 34% of rural Indian households have internet access (ITU, 2022), excluding marginalized communities from AI-driven education. Tagore's localized, low-tech model at Shantiniketan highlights the need for equitable access. AI outputs may perpetuate cultural or gender biases, contradicting Tagore's pluralistic ideals (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023). As Biesta (2013) warns, AI risks reducing teachers to "*technicians*." Professional development must prioritize pedagogical autonomy, echoing the Gurukul *guru's* role as both mentor and moral exemplar. But, to harmonize Tagore's vision with AI, institutions must adopt *human-centered AI* frameworks. For example, UNESCO's (2023) *Guidance for Generative AI in Education* advocates for AI as a "*co-pilot*" rather than an autonomous authority—a principle Tagore would endorse.

A Modern Synthesis – Gurukul, Tagore, and ChatGPT



A harmonized educational model, blending the Gurukul's mentorship traditions, Tagore's experiential ethos, and generative AI tools like ChatGPT, could manifest as a "*Digital Shantiniketan*." This framework would integrate AI as a supplementary resource within a holistic, nature- and community-centric pedagogy, grounded in three principles:

i. Project-Based Learning with AI Scaffolding

Drawing from Tagore's emphasis on *learning through creation*, schools could deploy ChatGPT to support interdisciplinary projects. For example, students designing a sustainable village might use AI to analyze climate data, draft grant proposals, or simulate crop yields, while teachers guide ethical discussions on equity and ecology (Resnick, 2017). Such an approach mirrors the Gurukul's synthesis of intellectual and practical skills, as seen in ancient *Vidyashram* curricula that combined astronomy with agrarian planning (Mookerji, 1989). Coding education, too, could adopt this model: ChatGPT's real-time debugging assistance aligns with Seymour Papert's constructionist theory, where coding is a tool for creative problem-solving (Papert, 1980).

ii. Hybrid Communities: Digital Gurukuls

Tagore's vision of *Visva-Bharati* as a "*meeting place of the world*" could extend into digital spaces. Platforms like Microsoft Teams or Moodle might host global student collaborations, such as co-writing plays or analyzing regional folklore, fostering intercultural dialogue akin to Shantiniketan's *Poush Mela* festivals (UNESCO, 2021). However, as Dillenbourg (2009) notes, successful online collaboration requires structured mentorship to avoid superficial engagement—a lesson from the Gurukul's emphasis on *guru-guided satsang* (master guided discourse) (Altekar, 1944).

iii. Critical AI Literacy and Ethical Guardrails

To prevent over-reliance on AI, teachers must cultivate *critical discernment*. For instance, students could compare ChatGPT's summaries of colonial history with primary sources from Dharampal's (1983) archives on pre-colonial Indian education, identifying biases or omissions. This aligns with Tagore's mandate for *svadhyaya* (self-study) and moral reflection (Tagore, 1933). The European Commission's (2022) *Ethical Guidelines on AI in Education* reinforces this, advocating for *AI systems that enhance—not replace—human judgment*.

A "*Digital Shantiniketan*" is not a utopian endpoint but an evolving praxis. By embedding AI within Tagore's humanistic framework—where technology amplifies creativity, criticality, and connection—education can resist the mechanistic traps that eroded the Gurukul. As Tagore wrote, "*The lamp of education must draw its oil from the soil of life itself*" (Tagore, 1917, p. 34). In an AI-driven age, that soil must nourish both roots and circuits.

Conclusion: Reconciling Roots and Innovation in the Digital Age

The journey from the Gurukul's ashrams to AI-driven classrooms underscores a timeless truth: education is not a static institution but a living, evolving dialogue between tradition and innovation. Rabindranath Tagore's experiential model, rooted in the Gurukul's holistic ethos yet refined through Shantiniketan's creative humanism, offers a resilient framework for navigating the digital age. Tagore's vision of education as a "*process of self-realization through*



communion with the world" (Tagore, 1933, p. 112) finds unexpected resonance in AI's potential to democratize personalized learning. ChatGPT's ability to simulate mentorship, generate creative prompts, and bridge global classrooms aligns with Shantiniketan's ideals of *Vishwa Bharati* (universal learning) (Das Gupta, 2009). Yet, as evidenced by the Gurukul's decline under colonial modernity, technological adoption risks perpetuating epistemic violence if divorced from cultural and ethical grounding (Kumar, 2015). The algorithmic biases embedded in ChatGPT's training data, for instance, threaten to replicate the colonial-era marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems (Dharampal, 1983; Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023). To counter this, teachers must reimagine AI as a *tool for liberation rather than homogenization*. Hybrid models, such as pairing ChatGPT with community-based mentorship circles, can revive the Gurukul's emphasis on relational learning while addressing 21st-century inequities. For example, India's National Education Policy (2020) advocates blending AI with local language instruction—a Tagorean synthesis of global tools and regional identity (Government of India, 2020). Similarly, UNESCO's (2023) call for "*human-centered AI*" mirrors Tagore's warning against mechanized education: "*A mind all logic is like a knife all blade; it makes the hand bleed that uses it*" (Tagore, 1916, p. 67).

However, the path forward demands systemic reckoning. The digital divide—30% of rural students lack internet access in India (ITU, 2023)—echoes the colonial exclusion that eroded Gurukuls. Bridging this gap requires policy frameworks that prioritize infrastructure equity, teacher training, and culturally responsive AI design (UNICEF, 2021). Moreover, as Resnick (2017) argues in *Lifelong Kindergarten*, technology must amplify creativity, not standardize it. ChatGPT-generated art prompts, for instance, should inspire students to paint *their* landscapes, not replicate algorithmic aesthetics. But we must agree that Tagore's model challenges us to view AI not as a disruptor but as an *amplifier of human potential*. Just as Shantiniketan's alumni, like Amartya Sen, harnessed interdisciplinary learning to address global inequities (Drèze & Sen, 2013), today's students might leverage AI to tackle climate crises or ethical AI governance. Yet, this demands a reclamation of education's moral purpose. As Biesta (2013) asserts, the "*beautiful risk*" of education lies in its capacity to nurture *subjectivity*—the ability to act independently in a complex world. In closing, the synthesis of Gurukul, Tagorean, and digital pedagogies is not merely an academic exercise but a societal imperative. By anchoring AI in the soil of experiential wisdom—where technology serves empathy, creativity, and justice—we honor Tagore's conviction that "*the highest education is that which does not merely inform but makes our life in harmony with all existence*" (Tagore, 1917, p. 45). The digital age need not eclipse the Gurukul's lamp; it can, with care, illuminate new frontiers.

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