

Under trees, minds bloom

CHANDREYEE GHOSE

Calcutta: English teacher Munmun Nandi often conducts nature trails as she teaches poetry to her students of Classes VI, VII and VIII.

"Last year, I took Class VI around the school grounds after teaching them Rabindranath Tagore's *The Flower School*. As the students soaked in the nature, it helped them imbibe Tagore's verses and philosophy better," said the Sri Sri Academy teacher.

The transition from four walls to learning under the open sky and amidst greenery helps students grasp better, say both educators and students.

As a tribute to Tagore's philosophy of learning in open classrooms under trees — a module started by the Nobel laureate in 1901 and still followed in Visva-Bharati University — many schools in the city and beyond hold quite a few lessons and creative activities outdoors, irrespective of the weather.

From science classes to sustainable lessons, students regularly enjoy field day activities that give them clarity

of thought, make them aware and teach them to be more responsible.

"My students are always excited to go for nature walks after a lesson. They observe the flowers, birds and also enjoy taking part in discussions or writing a paragraph or more. These lessons stay with them forever," added Nandi. Netrapriya Baldwa of Class XII still remembers Nandi's open-air English lessons.

"I could express myself better after those sessions. My creative flow would automatically increase, and I would be eager to write at least a paragraph," she said.

For most students, spending some time outdoors is both relaxing and fun, especially after the classroom grind. Primary sections get to do that more often.

"I have enjoyed outdoor lessons throughout my school life, more so during Primary classes," said Shreyan Chatterjee, a Class XII student of Mahadevi Birla World Academy (MBWA) and the president of the school's student council.

At MBWA, the nature club members always ideate outdoors. "We have multiple gardens, and students from different classes are in charge of looking after them and growing new plants on fixed days. They have also made medicinal soaps from the plants. Sometimes biology classes are held outdoors for students to observe what they have learnt in books. Even some English and mass media classes are held outside. We are used to studying outside, and that makes learning fun," added Shreyan.

Similarly, Ishani Acharya of Class VI, Calcutta Public School, Barasat, has taken part in painting, dance as well as sustainable lessons outdoors. "These lessons are not

just fun; they made me more aware of nature," she said.

At Delhi Public School, Howrah, a reading programme is held every winter. "Students sit under trees, read and reflect, just as Tagore had once envisioned," said science teacher Priyanka Gupta.

But for Shalmali Munshi of Class VI of the school, her biology classes get more interesting when held outdoors.

"Our science classes don't just take place in the labs but also outside in the garden where we can observe the flowers, leaves and all the natural processes that we had read about. I enjoy this learning from experience," she added.

Sustainability and conservation are the biggest lessons that the new-age students are learning outdoors through various activities. At Indus Valley World School (IVWS), children right from Nursery are encouraged to spend some time learning outside.

"Children don't mind the weather. They are always enthusiastic about going outside, despite the dust and grime. We encourage Primary children to spend at least 15-20 minutes outside, five days a week, painting what they see around them," said Rini Sen, Primary teacher at IVWS.

Class X student Priya Malakar had finished only a year at Calcutta Public School, Kalikapur, when she was assigned to paint a wall near the school's entrance last year. The graffiti was meant to mark the Kalikapur branch's Foundation Day.

"My friends and I completed the graffiti in a day, painting and learning a lot from the experience. Working outdoors for something that will remain even after we pass was an emotional experience for me. You learn a lot through such creative activities outdoors," said Priya.



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