

**Institutional  
Distinctiveness**

**Ramakrishna Mission Residential College, Narendrapur:  
a model of educational excellence amidst Nature.**

***Topavana* Ideal: a hark-back to the forest universities of ancient India**

Instead of ascribing dead, dull insentience to Nature, the age-old spiritualizing civilization of India has always looked upon Nature as the living source of knowledge. Swami Vivekananda, by way of bringing out the inner meaning of an Upanishadic lore, emphasized that ‘true education is gained by living in constant communion with Nature.’ To appreciate the role that a pristine natural surrounding plays in educational excellence we must remember Swami Vivekananda’s elegant definition of education as ‘the manifestation of the perfection already in man.’ Indeed, it is in bringing out this potential excellence that Nature acts as a powerful suggestion.

This vision of Swami Vivekananda finds an application in Narendrapur Ramakrishna Mission College where education is a lived experience in its idyllic natural environment. With its majestic trees, the rolling parks, the serene lakes, and its trilling birds, Narendrapur inspires in its inmates a deep sense of solidarity of existence. And no less does this scenic rhapsody invite the students to a world of exploration. Indeed, so deep is the influence of the sylvan setting on the educational ambience of Narendrapur that one might well be reminded of the ideal of *Topavana* – the ancient abode of education and culture in the woods. Our College, thus nestling amidst nature’s bounty, has been striving to help manifest in its learners the two dimensions of education – ethical excellence and academic excellence. How is this achieved? This takes us to appreciating the know-how of this process of manifestation as informed by Swami Vivekananda.

## **Nature: an ally for the unfoldment of the hidden excellence**

With his whole thrust on man-making, Swami Vivekananda enunciated his practical philosophy of the combined Yogas (Raja, Bhakti, Karma, and Jnana). Swamiji based this practical approach on the recognition of the entirety of man's psychological constitution – i.e. the cognitive (thinking), affective (feeling), and conative (willing) aspects of a human being. Indeed, Swamiji compared Yogas to a bird. “Three things,” he said, “are necessary for a bird to fly — the two wings and the tail as a rudder for steering. Jnana (Knowledge) is the one wing, Bhakti (Love) is the other, and Yoga is the tail that keeps up the balance.”

Interestingly, the emblem of the Ramakrishna order that he used to present this integral view was deeply inspired by Nature. The emblem consists of an elegant swan against the backdrop of the rising sun, surrounded by wavy waters from which has arisen a beautiful lotus flower along with a couple of leaves. This whole picture is encircled by a hooded serpent.

Indeed, the natural environment of Narendrapur, with its flora and fauna, stands as an objective representation of this symbolism of harmonious development. To be sure, the daily life of Narendrapur cannot but heed to such unspoken promptings of the surrounding nature towards a life of harmony. Let us now explore how, taking a cue from nature, Narendrapur has been following an integral approach to help its students achieve educational and ethical excellence.

## **The Ideal in practice**

Every aspect of educational life of Narendrapur is inspired and guided by Swami Vivekananda's unique vision of modern education. Recognizing the supreme need of eternal values amidst societal flux, Swamiji looked upon the ‘Gurukula’ system of India as an effective antidote to the steady erosion of educational values. At the same time, he put a high premium on the modern scientific knowledge. Swami Vivekananda's integral vision of learning seamlessly combines the elements of ‘Gurukula’ tradition of India and the scientific temper of the West.

Indeed, the fully residential setting of Narendrapur with the monastics, teachers, and the supporting staff ministering to the resident students takes after a 'Gurukula' system not only in spirit, but in letter too. Against such a residential backdrop, we might as well explore how the four Yogas remain interwoven into the scheme of a student's daily life.

- ✓ The day begins with Raja Yoga. The students, waking up at 5 am, go to the shrine for prayer and meditation. The morning stillness of the surrounding nature adds to the quiescence pervading their minds.
- ✓ Living as they do amidst ineffable sweetness of Nature and under the loving care of monks, the students develop great capacity for affectionate relationship with other fellow students. This gives them the latitude and the power of adjustment with others during daily interaction. Such emotional development is indeed an offshoot of Bhakti Yoga.
- ✓ Community living in a hostel, if anything, is a great corrective to selfish life. By living under the same roof with others and sharing their sorrows and joys, one invariably rises over pettiness. Soon enough, one develops the capacity to sacrifice one's pet likes and dislikes for others. As such, the students of Narendrapur cannot but imbibe unselfishness – the presiding spirit of Narendrapur. Any day, this is evidenced by a student rushing to the aid of his fellow brothers with alacrity. Such instances of Karma Yoga are part and parcel of Narendrapur's community life.
- ✓ While the academic training surely develops one's intellect, the knowledge of fundamental principles of life gives one the true insight into what is essential and what is non-essential. The spiritual atmosphere of Narendrapur equips the students with this rare gift of discernment – the practice of Jnana Yoga. As a result, a student makes his daily life balanced and controlled by his discerning intellect.

In addition, students are particularly encouraged to participate in various service activities that take place throughout the year.

Thus, throughout the year, the students remain exposed to an environment conducive to the harmonious development of their 'head, heart, and hand'. The environment verily helps them manifest their character efficiency and intellectual acumen – the twin aspects of perfection. Enabled thus, the students, after the completion of their course, eventually step into the wider world – not just to survive there, but to conquer it by the power of goodness.

Narendrapur, aided by its exquisite physical environment and more importantly by its sterling group of people, has been thus striving to live up to Swami Vivekananda's vision of an ideal educational Institute for turning out individuals who are strong in both skill and value.

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