

**The Santiniketan Ashrama Samaja:  
Integrating Pedagogy as Social  
Responsibility in the Architecture of  
Praxis at Visva-Bharati**

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**Part 1**

**Situating the context of the ‘samaja’:**

The seed of ‘Tagore’s University’ (Ganguly xvii) was not planted in the formative years of the *Bhramacaryashrama* in 1901 as we understand today. “*Yatra visvambhavatyekanidam*” (Bidhusekhar Sastri would utter this to highlight the essence of the asrama)

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was to connect the centre of learning with the *visva*(the world and beyond). Like the idea of the ‘Nation’, Rabindranath was weary about the education policies which were replicated by the universities set up to create a class that would justify the ways of the British Raj to the colonial subjects (Mukhopadhyay 156). This idea of subjecthood was however quite complex in the context of the subcontinent as ‘schooling’ the colonial subject had been a zone of contention, reconciliation during the colonial regime and even as the master reformed, redrafted policies or finally left! I shall not deal with the formation of that subjecthood in colonial Bengal. I would rather examine and situate the responses of the subject that would be aligned with Sisir Kumar Das’ complex yet apparently open drafting of the multiple possibilities of responses of an author/ thinker within the Indian literary sociology in his ambitious and unfinished project - *A History of Indian Literature*. Being an avid reader of Rabindranath, I feel Sisir Kumar Das was also performing his responsibility as a scholar of a post

contact zone and albeit in sync with Rabindranath's message on India's history- "BharatbarsherItihash" (38). The poet-pedagogue Rabindranath was perhaps drafting the possibilities of re-thinking the pedagogy of a society that was alienated through the- 'disciplinary' boundaries of colonial pedagogy. It was a collective effort that was endorsed by Rabindranath and his contemporaries who joined him in the school that was established outside the city. Built on ideas of developments that were unnatural to the ethos of learning in the Indian context of, the city - centered learning hubs were inadequate to accommodate the diversity of Indian societies. This article will thus try to chart the development of the *ashrama* into Visva-Bharati (1901 to 1921) and situate the architecture of *vidya-carca* (modes of learning in a more inclusive and effective way) in Santiniketan- Sriniketan. These dual zones of alternative learning became Rabindranath's 'laboratory' of contesting colonial pedagogy in a constructive way. Rabindranath was probably thinking

about the function of the poet, the artist in a society which was fragmented and fractured.

By tracing the simultaneous developments of the various 'Arts' in Santiniketan and the project of rural reconstruction in Sriniketan, Rabindranath was taking the idea of Visva-Bharati to the society. He wanted to instill the responsibility of the *ashramites*(students, teachers, non-teaching staff members) to connect with the society- in a wider sense to reconcile with '*swadesh*' (belongingness to one's own country, not necessarily 'patriotism' in the narrow sense). This article will thus emphasize on the significance of the vision of Rabindranath in understanding the relationship of academic practices and the *samaja*(not society consciously in its restricted understanding) in a more inclusive sense, often liberating the idea of the 'Individual' in the 'society' that was chartered, utilitarian, and thus required a paradigmatic shift to accommodate the vision of the non-West.

## Plurilingualism and Mother tongue: Verbal and non-verbal communication in Santiniketan

In the note from publisher for the compilation of *Bangla Samskritir Dhara* Amrit Sen identifies the possibility of *Visvavidyasamgraha* first in Bangla and the into other Indian languages as early as 1917-18 (Sen 7). This would gradually become the basic backbone of Visva-Bharati along with the institutes of performing and visual arts and the various mappings of rural development and agriculture at Sriniketan was quite natural and organically coherent. This project was complete by 1921. Since its inception, the *Brahmacaryasrama*, the school founded by Rabindranath in 1901 had endorsed this tripartite idea of an aesthetics of learning (*vidya-carca*). That the basis of knowledge production would be plurilingual, multicultural and multimodal in its essence and practice is evident in the emphasis on language learning by Rabindranath (P. Sen 10). As Visva-Bharati

emerged as an alternative model- a knowledge hub, an open-air museum of human activity, the dissemination of this unprocessed knowledge required a new structure, rather structures as already existing patterns could not contain this attitude towards learning that would involve ‘beauty,’ ‘joy’ and ‘propriety’-to be more specific, an over- emphasis on *aucitya*(that which is just and in desirable proportion). The pedagogy was anti-colonial on one hand, and a clarion call for extending our horizon in mapping and simultaneously drafting a blueprint to receive these apparently known and unknown (*jana-ajana*) that we had been encountering through several contacts over the centuries, colonialism being a permanent scar. The architecture of Santiniketan is also an organic testament to this claim on alternative practices (Patha Bhavana- Simha Sadana- Uttarayan conclave structurally and in their practices). Our quest for knowledge in Santiniketan has always been multilayered, often digressing from a particular telos and branching out to acknowledge the multiple possibilities

of intersections. There were ‘passages to’ penetrate these knowledge systems that were made to co-exist physically like the old Vidya Bhavana-Patha Bhavana or the plantations around *pampa* lake behind *guhaghar* (the art shared space with a Japanese garden nurtured by Rathindranath, the only surviving son of Rabindranath and Pratima Debi, Rathindranath’s wife who was a widow extended an architecture of inclusion).

As India emerged as a political identity with her own ‘quest for relevance’ in the post-independence period, Visva-Bharati quietly nurtured a distinct knowledge system which had become an accepted framework within the nationalist framework then and a pan-Indian model in recent times with the implementation of NEP 2020. The anxiety of the formative years was not how to accommodate the East-West encounter alone, rather a constructive effort in re-aligning, re-emphasising the existing ideologies of connections between languages, cultures, practices

across the ‘World’ through an inclusive pedagogy- the response as indicated by Sisir Kumar Das. Interestingly, knowledge was not a necessity for Rabindranath and that is evident in his writings on aesthetics. He was interweaving the multiple possibilities of intersections of ‘*jnan-carca*’ (quest for knowledge) through the introduction of various disciplines within Visva-Bharati that had their own aesthetics- the way they would perceive the *visva* and integrate that understanding in ‘life-long-learning.’ Sriniketan emerged as a praxis that would take the concept of the university and its academic praxis to the society. This created a possibility of accommodating another form of criticality that came from ‘below.’ The ‘below’ was to be realized and worked upon continuously-it is never achieved. Visva-Bharati as a concept demands a dynamic framework to acknowledge the coexistence of diverse possibilities of knowledge production. The disciplinary practices in and around Visva-Bharati is useful to understand the idea of a ‘*samaja*’ which the founder acharya of Visva-Bharati

had envisioned where austerity became the ethics of his aesthetics. This aesthetics had a responsibility. Art was not outside society.

### **The Pedagogic shift:**

Rabindranath was probably thinking about the responsibility of an academic institution in a post contact zone. In an interview given in Canada that was reprinted in *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Rabindranath is vocal about Europe's status in Asia and why it had been under the scanner (Islam 4). Integrating translation practices would thus have its own politics in the framework of Tagore's university. Since HorySan, the first non-Indian student joining the school in 1902, this idea would gradually take shape (Das Gupta Uma 91). In contesting the impact of colonial modernity Rabindranath was quite vocal in his lecture series '*Atmashakti*' which begins with "What is Nation" and gradually goes to address the '*chhatrasamaja*' (student community). He identifies the

responsibilities of the educated youth in the colonial context. The following areas might be identified as the cornerstone of his ambitious project of decolonisation:

- Familiarity, commonality, affinity in the plurilingual zone of colonial India
- Significance of Mother tongue
- Assimilation, acculturation in cultural practices
- Beyond grammar: Linguistics and literary cultures
- Orality and Literacy: *ChhelebhoolanoChhora* (collecting lullabies as orally transmitted cultural heirlooms)
- Verbal and non-verbal communication: The school of the Arts in colonial India and Rabindranath's dialogues with Vallathol and Udaya Shankara
- Rethinking language politics in understanding scientific and other forms of knowledge systems in *Visva Vidya Sangraha* (Sen 7-9)

## The spirit of the *samaja* as opposed to ‘World Spirit’: towards re-aligning Indian Knowledge Systems

Rabindranath’s pedagogic shift is based on his synthesis of the models of learning available in the *sastras*. Responsibility was a form of aesthetics that had to be cultivated. It was hinted perhaps by Kalidasa in his opening scene of *Abhinjan Sakuntalam*. There is an ethics associated with the aesthetics. The spiritual awakening was more important than an overemphasis on the physical will of the individual. The individual was nourished by the surroundings and hence the project of Santiniketan from the beginning of the late nineteenth century was built on the idea of giving back, sharing in the true spirit of sharing. The responsibility was not a product of an inherent ‘guilt’ around encroachment or transgression. It was directed towards cooperation and not creating a model that was imposed from above. The path was that of *chittasuddhi* to *atmashakti* (Tagore,

“Atmashakti” 617) and these translating into *atmanirbharta*- self-reliance that was need of the hour. Interestingly, this state could be achieved through the other arts. Music would become the substratum of the architecture I have mentioned in the title. The inherent *rasa* of Rabindranath’s *Song Offerings* can be seen as a culmination of his lived experience of a *samaja* which was unclear to him until he left his comfort of the city and met the rural people of Bengal- that was also the beginning of his designing the school that would be located far away from the artificial space of governance- the city. Self-reliance would become the blueprint of the Sriniketan experimentations and applied field of critical enquiry. The path to *atmashakti* (will force) would then be *dhyana* (meditation), *sadhana* (*practice* with dedication), *soundarya* (beauty), *karma* (work with ethics and integrity) which were the basic elements of the inherited traditions of our subcontinent. Rabindranath’s cosmopolitanism is embedded in this understanding of the world and he understood his

responsibility as a poet. *Jagate Ananda Jogye Amar Nimatran* (poem “I have found my call...” in English/Gitanjali) was the call he felt from within to connect with the world.

### **The Poet Pedagogue: Synergy between learning and society:**

The now UNESCO world heritage site was the first site for Rabindranath’s experimentation with the architecture of a school that would liberate and not restrict the minds.. He was bringing the process of learning under the sky and modelled it around the *tapovana* knowing fully well the daunting task that he had imposed on himself. The architecture of the school which is now the Patha Bhavana complex is a perfect example of organic architecture which was cosmopolitan and inclusive. It would gradually become a confluence of buildings, murals depicting the cultural heritage of exchanges, transactions, and receptions. The world will find a nest

not at the cost of effacement of individual identities. Rabindranath would align the Visual art with rural reconstruction where familiarity and equality would be the guiding force to forge new connections with the society. Rabindranath would deploy the Arts to create a fraternity which would contest the precarious society. Art was embedded in the existence. There was a possibility of encouraging criticality through art and that is what Nandalal, Ramkinkar, Binodbehari, Mani da did in moments of anxieties and trained future generations who later became the pillars of the thought processes of the ideology of decolonizing the ‘society.’ To quote Shivakumar “What Rabindranath did with words, they did with colours and brushes.” Santiniketan became the open-air museum of Indian Arts. Rabindranath was aligning the familiar with the mundane, creating the possibility of re-thinking what we were made to overlook. The eco-system of Santiniketan, particularly that of Kala Bhavana should be seen as one of the long-lasting experiments of Arts education. The revolutionary

Bauhaus in Germany (1919-1933) could be seen as a similar movement in understanding the Arts and society. These were not Utopic, rather attempts to connect with the society through the arts- a quest for relevance. The transculturalism of the Santiniketan experiment was encouraging the possibility of dissimilar response to a similar locale. The responsibility that the practitioners of Santiniketan shared with the founder was non-compliance to any form like 'hindu art,' 'high art,' 'low art' and participated in the process of interrogating 'Nationalism.' If Nandalal was engaging with decorative Japan, Ramkinkar was playing with water colour to forge a connection with the cultural elements of the landscape around Santiniketan. Binodbehari would extend that in his scrolls. It would thus be important to acknowledge the role played by Rabindranath, Coomaraswamy in taking Indian Arts and Aesthetics to the non-Indian zone in the twentieth century. As I had been hinting at the precarious 'society' as an abstraction in relationship with the individual, I would like to move

towards more concrete evidences by trying to understand the framework through which the Sriniketan experiment could be seen. By the time the British left, leaving India as ‘illustrations of poverty in the world,’ Rabindranath becomes relevant, often untranslatable as we lost the tools to recognize the responsibility embedded in his *vidya-carca* of his school.

## Part II

### The ‘School’: Decolonising the mind, body, and soul

Before analysing how this dream of the poet pedagogue has been translated in the functioning of the institution of national importance over the centuries, it would be worth noting the reception of his ‘*ishkul*’ in 1914 as it would also help us map the journey of the institution’s response to the social changes that were shaping up India from within and without. As I had pointed out earlier, that art became the substratum for this change. ‘*Atmashakti*’

was connected to self-realization and subsequently to self-governance.

In an article published in *The Daily Chronicle* (January 12, 1914; P 6, Col4) J. Ramsay Macdonald writes about the “Asram” of the Great Bengali Poet. Interestingly, quite poignantly, he connected this with the art movement in Bengal, recollecting what Abanindranath was trying to achieve- the artist graduating into the poet-teacher. It is worth mentioning here what Macdonald reports:

Moreover, the Santiniketan is no mere seminary for the education of boys. It is alive with the life of India. It is aware of what it is going on outside. It shares in the larger Indian life. The particular interest of the school is the enlightenment of the mass...The villages around are inhabited by the aboriginal Santals, and the boys of the school go out sometimes with football or bat and begin a game. When a crowd

has gathered the game is stopped and the players talk of knowledge to the villagers. From this an evening class is formed and the Santiniketan boys go out and teach in it. The day I was there about a dozen of these children had come in and were being taught under a tree. They were lively imps with wide interested eyes and so full of life that they could not keep still. They were being shown the delights of the stereoscope and were being taught to describe accurately what they saw. Two boys were looking after them. It was their tribute to India and their service to the reincarnated motherland to which all their youthful enthusiasm was devoted...Everything was peaceful, natural, happy...worthy and well-meaning graduates from Oxford and Cambridge are toiling and perspiring like blacksmiths with heavy hammers to beat and bend the Indian mind into strange forms on strange anvils, and where there is unhappiness and sadness of heart-

timorous whispers instead of laughter, doubt instead of hope. (54-55)

Well, this could be deemed a bit patronizing but the ideology of Rabindranath's way of giving back to the society was clear. The school always had its trials and tribulations which affected the poet educator deeply, yet he considered it to the vessel that contained the rewards of his life. He would dedicate it to his countrymen and Gandhi would keep his words in rescuing the vessel as and when required by generating funds for the institution that never accepted and assistance from the British government because the conditions under which they were given were not aligned with the poet's vision of his school. Rabindranath had devoted the proceeds of the Nobel Prize for Literature and the royalties of his books for the betterment of his school.

If we were to answer the question that was left unanswered in the article on the review of Rabindranath Tagore's *Nationalism* in The Times

Literary Supplement (September 13, 1917; P435,  
Col1/2):

As to immediate practical problems, the book does not give much guidance. If we ask what Sir Rabindranath would like to substitute for the present regime in India, or how the economic needs of mankind are now to be supplied without a complex industrial organization, we get no answer. It is for us to recognize those evils and dangers, and consider the way of salvation.

Rabindranath's answer is reflected in the "League of Vagabonds" (The Times, January 6, 1921, P9, Col 3) where the west recognized the significance of a fellowship of man that would look beyond race, rank, religion. His 'school' would be the answer which was unidentifiable to Europe like many other conjectures of Tagore like the 'Nation.' Europe felt Rabindranath was misunderstanding the conceptual framework of the State and Nation as categories. However, a report published in The Times Educational Supplement (September 21,

1916; P 140, Col 2) speaks a lot about ‘Where Tagore Teaches’. Interestingly the report was published when Rabindranath was touring Japan and the United States. The report documents the education system which was “moral as well as secular, and thereby to provide what is a crying need in Bengal” (Kundu et al, 95). The report further documents the significance of the outdoor classes and they are introduced to elementary experiments in science along with the *sahitya sabhas* and debates organized as part of the curriculum. The report ends with a profound message:

The boys are encouraged to do social services. They go about the villages, like the Christian missionaries, with books and medicine, which they distribute to the villagers. Without respect of persons or castes they attend to the sick. It is common to see a Brahmin boy of the school speaking words of comfort and administering relief to some poor “untouchable.” Thanks to

their enterprise, night schools have also been founded for the benefit of such low-caste people. And as they return from the villages, with a clear sky and a soft moon overhead and the giant trees around, do they not hear His silent footsteps in the darkness, and feel that he comes, he comes, he ever comes?

This answer was probably embedded in Rabindranath's lyrical anxieties for his *Jeevandeota*. His religion of man was that of an international cosmopolitan who could look beyond borders. *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* was a collaboration in that direction, his way of serving his society.

### Part III

#### The Sriniketan Project: Aligning academia with the society

The Institute of Rural Reconstruction was founded in 1923. Sriniketan will trace its identity since then. Rabindranath wanted to integrate health, education, knowledge around latest developments in the sphere of agriculture to be integrated with the agrarian society in and around villages near Surul and Sriniketan. Research became an integral part of this activism where Rabindranath had Elmhirst along with Rathindranath, Tagore's son as the chief architects of this 'ideal society.' Dispensaries and health cooperatives were established. Awareness programme around diseases were integrated into the routine activities. The extension activities that begun in nineteen villages around Santiniketan have now reached out to more than sixty-five villages. In this context, the reminiscences of Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sircar about *Bratibalak Sangathan* is worth mentioning. In *KobirPathshala: Patha Bhavana o Siksha SatrerItihas* we find a comprehensive yet anecdotal history of the formative years of Sriniketan:

The nature of education largely depends on the kind of society one wants to build. The education at Siksha Satra was based on Rabindranath's dream of reconstructing rural life. The dream can be expressed through three key words-swadeshi, self-reliance, and cooperation. The education of Patha-Bhavana eventually spread to other schools in the country, and even abroad. However, the type of education imparted at the Siksha Sastra too spread to schools in other parts of the country-not as the brain child of Rabindranath and Elmhirst, but under the term *Nai Talim*, coined by Gandhiji (*The Poet's School*, 224).

We are revisiting the history of the poet's school at another historical juncture in India. It is thus interesting and worth discussing the scope of Sriniketan which had worked towards apprenticeship embedded education models in 1923-25 which has now been acknowledged by the latest education policies across the world. Annual

training camps were organized during 1924-25. In this context the establishment of *Sikshasatra* (1924) and *Loksikshasamsad* (1936) should be analysed in details. Silpa Sadan, a vocational training was established in 1929 where the students were introduced to handloom, leather, wood, iron, stitching, masonry so that they could become small enterprises of their own. Subsequently ‘Silpa Bhandar,’ a cooperative was opened in 1937 which sold goods produced by the students. The outreach programmes were brought under a programme called ‘Village Visit.’ The *Seva Bibhag* of the Ashram Sammilani engaged in serving the rural poor (*The Poet’s School*, 168). It is important to situate the staging of plays in Santiniketan. A journey that begun with *Bisarjan* (1903), the essay “Rangamancha”, *Saradotsaab*, *Mukut*, *Achalayatan* and others complemented the project of the school. In 1908 *Lakshmir Pariksha* was performed and in 1910 Rathindranath married Pratima Devi, a widow. Apart from the creative engagement, Rabindranath’s

Dhananjay Bairagi will have other implications in the ashrama community- inducting girl students in the performative zone which was erstwhile dominated by male students. Dance, music and theatre will become indispensable in the social inclusion of the *samaja* which Rabindranath had dreamt. *Natir Puja* where Rabindranath played the role of Upali should be seen as a major event in cementing the ideologies of integrating the Arts in developing a society that was in multiple phases of translation. *Rituranga*, *Tasher Desh*, *Chandalika*, *Chitrangada* will contest several stereotypes and simultaneously become tools for generating funds for the institution through their performances.

### **A project that continues...**

In her essay “A Transformational Pedagogy: Reflections on Rabindranath’s Project of Decolonisation,” Himani

Bannerji, a direct spun of the poets' school rightly points out that:

The broader consciousness- raising goal of pedagogy, the essential purpose of education for Rabindranath lies not in teaching literacy, facts, and skills, but in enhancing the self-awareness which helps to link the self with the other, with society and the individual with the world (Bannerji25). Bannerji situates Rabindranath's project of the school as the foundation for social and cultural transformation. Recollecting Sisir Kumar Das's works on the English writings of Tagore, Bannerji would rightly situate Rabindranath's cultural interventions as strategic project of decolonization, legitimizing the performativity of the space called Santiniketan- the nest for alternative ideologies, often conflicting but having a dangerous symmetry. Rabindranath's artistic interventions should thus

be seen as extensions of his radical ideas on societal reciprocity and collective uprising. Amongst many ideas, the idea of a secular society is an eternal work in progress, never to be achieved in the subcontinent, was felt and announced by Rabindranath in the several crises he identified in our societies we cohabit. Rabindranath would thus emphasize on personality, creativity to create the *samaja* he dreamt about to bring social changes in modern India.

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