

## The Idea of Santiniketan: A Personal Understanding

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One of our friends who comes from a nearby village reported that the first thing a new headmaster does to make his presence felt in a village, is to paint the school building and then expel a student! He told us the story when our own school building was being painted at the time of the joining of a new principal. A 'face lift' of some of the Santiniketan buildings was taking place, before the visit of some VIPs. As the word 'face lift' suggests, only the sides of the buildings that would face the VIPs were painted! For the people who live there this felt really ridiculous.

This, to my mind, reflects a structure or movement of thought which is linear or one dimensional. Linear thought process produces linear communication and necessarily ends up in a one-way communication. It does not leave any space for a dialogue.

The space arrangement, the positioning of different buildings or activity centres in Santiniketan was originally designed in such a way that incorporated dialogue, and encouraged human interaction between the community members. Students' dormitory, kitchen and dining hall, library and research centre, auditorium and out-door classes were all situated around the play ground. One can still see this structure of the original Ashram. It was impossible to move from one place to the other without encountering either the cooks singing as they chopped the vegetables, or see a part of a mural taking shape, or a football match between students and staff, or chance upon a Bidhushekar Shastri or a Nandalal Bose.

This circularity of space arrangement with shifting and multiple attention centres was also applied to the individual activity centres or buildings. Rooms in the students' hostels were not placed one next to the other in a linear spatial arrangement; they were placed in a circular fashion around a courtyard. It was impossible to ignore the presence of the others. Although the individual buildings did have a front, they did not have a frontal presence. All the sides of the buildings were as welcoming, functional and beautiful as the front. Students sat in a circle in the class and as a result the 'frontality' of the teacher was challenged. There was a constant flow of communication or interaction between one another. This is also one of the fundamental qualities of the early Santiniketan murals and environmental sculptures. They did not have a frontal, framed or focussed presence.

We find a parallel of this cyclical movement in Indian music in general and Indian classical music in particular. Rabindranath Tagore used the sthayi-antara-sanchari-abhog musical structure of Dhrupad as the foundation for his songs. Structurally it breaks the linearity of the movement, and in performance, becomes sthayi-antara, returning to sthayi, moving on to sanchari-abhog, and back again to sthayi to complete the cycle. The time cycle or tal system in our music is also necessarily cyclical. Smaller spans of time cycles operate within the larger sthayi-antara-sanchari-abhog structure, like the earth spinning and revolving around the sun at the same time.

### Brahmacharyashram

Rabindranath started his residential school at Santiniketan with five children on 21 December 1901. It was founded to create a free and fearless atmosphere for children to grow up in, in close contact with nature. They were encouraged to grow as complete human beings. Gradually it became a

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community of students, teachers, workers, and occasional visitors. Santiniketan eventually came to mean a particular way of life. A dynamic community—constantly changing, incorporating, discovering, searching and suffering—Santiniketan was never meant to be a fixed ideal.

Right from the beginning there was a spirit of self-governance and democracy. In 1912 Rabindranath established a unique institution called Ashram-Sammilani. It was a body of elected students—very often misunderstood as a students' union, with teachers-in-charge, to look after the functioning of the school. Generally students' unions are primarily concerned with student interest; they—or any other union for that matter—are formed to protect their rights against the authority's misuse of power. In this case, however, all the teachers and students were its members and their central concern was the school or the Ashram. There were forums for academic discussions from the early years of Santiniketan. The first of its kind was probably the Sayang Sabha in 1905 where all the teachers met every evening. They discussed literature, social sciences and politics. In 1911 the Prabandha Path Sabha was born where papers were presented on literature and the sciences and discussed by specialists. Meeting for the students' Sahitya Sabha was a regular practice from April 1910. Students read out their articles, stories, poems and sang songs.

It is well known that a lot of festivals were and are celebrated in Santiniketan throughout the year. The first was Paush Utsav in 1890. It was a religious festival and was also called Brahmotsav. The fourth annual Paush Utsav in 1894 introduced a fair as a part of the festival. Along with the local people putting up stalls and selling their wares, there were Jatra performances and a fireworks display after the evening prayer. But the most successful festivals were those that invited and celebrated the seasons. These were totally secular in which the whole community participated in the process of seasonal changes. On 18 January 1907, Rabindranath's youngest son Shamindranath took the initiative to organize a spring festival. The following year Rabindranath asked Kshitimohan Sen to organize a monsoon festival. Rabindranath could not be present for either of these festivals; but their description enthused him so much that he immediately started writing a drama to celebrate autumn! This is probably how he started composing seasonal songs. Several autumn songs were composed that year to become part of the drama Sharodotsav. Two new festivals were introduced in 1928—Briksha Ropon (Tree Planting) and Halakarshan (Ploughing). Many other festivals have been added on since then. These celebrate the flow of life, nature's fertility and ever-recurring youth, and the Bangla New Year. Even the annual convocation, Samabartan Utsav, is a festival. On the one hand, these festivals created a platform for everyone to come out of their private spaces and meet others to do something collectively. They also created a platform for culture—be it poetry, Vedic chanting, music, dancing or decorating—and turned the practice of culture into a part of living rather than a process of producing objects to consume.

Art and life never meant two different things for Nandalal Bose, Surendranath Kar and their students who planned the decoration of the festivals with amazing mastery and creativity. Visual elements normally create the ambience whereas music has a quality of direct emotional communication. Rabindranath himself was one the greatest composers of all time. Many of the songs he composed for this purpose were simple enough for everybody to sing and the whole community did sing together as it does even today. Those who have been in such situations know the tremendous sense of participation that it is capable of producing.

### Visva Bharati

Pandit Bidhushekhari Shastri joined the school in 1905 as a Sanskrit teacher. He believed that old Sanskrit tols and chatushpathis had lost their relevance in contemporary society. Keeping our own education and knowledge as the fundamental basis, we needed to study other streams of knowledge produced by human beings everywhere in the world; if not, our education would be untrue and incomplete. By rejecting alien culture we make our weakness and poverty look ridiculous and irritating. This was against the Nationalist position which postulated a difference from, and rejection of, anything alien. For Rabindranath the primary function of universities was the

production of knowledge; distribution of it was only secondary. Thus the idea of Visva Bharati was born. The foundation of Visva Bharati (The Santiniketan University) was formally laid on 23 December 1918 and it started functioning from 3 July 1919

Visva Bharati started functioning as a centre where scholars, artists, musicians came together and got involved in collective creative activities. They were teaching and learning at the same time. Departments of Fine Arts, Music, Literature, Religion, Language and Philosophy were established. There was no prescribed syllabus or curriculum, nor was there any degree awarded. Every teacher learned something other than his/her own subject and every student had to give lessons on his/her own subject. The university was divided into two sections.

1. Purbo Bibhag, the school section and
2. Uttor Bibhag, the research section.

Visva Bharati as an institution or Santiniketan as a community were fundamentally concerned with living. Living was not about the practice of power but about the discovery of the humane. By living, therefore, one does not only earn food but more importantly earns 'truth'.

Rabindranath never thought of education in terms of rural or urban or suburban education. For him education was about exploring the full potential of the human being. Therefore the kind of education he was offering in Santiniketan did not fulfill the expectation of the elite who were looking for an effective transfer of knowledge and information which would prepare their children to fit uncritically into the existing social order. There have been a lot of experiments done on the techniques of this 'effective transfer' all over the world, like doing away with the examination system or teaching under the trees or creating an atmosphere of so-called 'freedom'. However, the underlying concerns have remained the same. Unfortunately, this has come to be known as 'experimental education'. Santiniketan never wanted to become an employment generating institution. It aimed to create an atmosphere where children would learn to respond to the world around them without any resistance, to create a mind that is alert, questioning and creative. Therefore it did not have a fixed system which was to be followed strictly. Systems and techniques evolved, changed, or were thrown away in response to the situation and context. Clearly, this is not what the elite would want for their children and it was under their pressure that Rabindranath had to accept a few systems and techniques he was opposed to; otherwise as he put it, 'nobody would have been in my school'.

Siksha Satra, another school within Santiniketan, was established on 1 July 1924. The first six students from nearby villages started getting education through the kind of traditional knowledge and skill they were involved with or familiar with. Traditional crafts like cooking, farming, weaving, brick making, and pottery played the central role. It was craft in the real sense of the practice- not limited to its decorative, superficial form. The emphasis was on its fundamental function, that of making living joyful and beautiful. Rabindranath himself was quite enthusiastic about the experiment and thought that what he had not been able to achieve in Brahmacharyashram (later called Patha Bhavana), was taking place here. Siksha Satra was shifted to Sriniketan - Visva Bharati's rural reconstruction centre in 1926.

### Towards a Harmonious World

Self-organization or self-reliance of society had always interested Rabindranath. He believed that in our country the samaj (community) was not ruled by some outside force, it was ruled by itself. And this is what he called the swadeshi samaj. This was possible because the samaj was constituted by self-regulated individuals. It was grounded on what he called atmashakti. A functioning of a community of this kind was possible by exploring inner strength. Santiniketan, to my mind, attempted to create a similar kind of samaj. And it is necessary to remain small in size to sustain the harmony of such communities. Surely it should be possible to create a harmonious world with many such independent, yet related communities or mandalis, perhaps like many planets spinning and revolving around the sun at the same time.

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