

INTACH



JOURNAL OF  
HERITAGE STUDIES  
*an indian journal on conservation*

Chapter 5	
Integrated Development Plan of the Mahakal Virasat Kshetra: The Mahakal Van, Ujjain	
<i>Dr Meera I. Dass and Pooja Saxena</i>	
Chapter 6	59
From Restoration to Revitalization: Searching for the Rationale for Conservation of Historic Gardens	
<i>Priyaleen Singh</i>	91
Chapter 7	
Fighting for Flowers along the Damodar River: The Anatomy of a Campaign against Destructive Coal Mining	
<i>Bulu Imam</i>	115
Chapter 8	
Zonal Anthropological Museum (ZAM) and the Tribal Painters of Bastar: Preserving Heritage through Participation	
<i>Dr Ranju Hasini Sahoo</i>	139
Chapter 9	
Looking Forward through Looking Back: Rabindranath Tagore and the Neo-Bengal School in the Development of Santiniketan Architecture	
<i>Samit Das</i>	161
Chapter 10	
System of Traditional Weather Forecasting in Jaisalmer District	
<i>Manu Bhatnagar</i>	183
Chapter 11	
Governance and World Heritage Cities	
<i>S. P. Shorey</i>	213
Chapter 12	
Crisis on the Roads: Salvage Archaeology in India	
<i>Sunil Gupta</i>	249

## Chapter 9

# Looking Forward through Looking Back: Rabindranath Tagore and the Neo-Bengal School in the Development of Santiniketan Architecture

Samit Das

### Introduction

Probably it would be pertinent to start our inquiry on the role and contribution of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and the Neo-Bengal School of Art in encouraging the eclectic style of Santiniketan architecture with a brief outline of the establishment of the Brahmo Samaj by Raja Rammohun Roy (1774–1833), the ‘first vertical man’ of Bengal renaissance and his Brahmo Sabha, the trust he founded in 1828.<sup>1</sup> They were responsible in more ways than one for ushering in, on the Indian subcontinent, an era of modernism with special focus on social reforms, education and science.

The Brahmo Samaj, which literally means the society of the worshippers of ‘One True God’ was founded as a trust, the Brahmo Sabha, to organize a place for the non-sectarian worship of the ‘One True God’, and to consolidate ‘the bond of union between men of all religious persuasion and creeds’, purely on the principles of Vedantic monotheism, devoid of all forms of idolatry.<sup>2</sup> However, some scholars



have pointed out that there were other reasons for establishing the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, which was primarily done to promote the Hindu political interests during the British East India Company's rule in Bengal.<sup>3</sup>

The Brahmo Samaj's seminal role in promoting several cross-fertilization of ideas to invigorate educated urban Indian thought and its eclectic outlook on life is undeniable. What Rammohun and his associate Dwarakanath Tagore (1794–1846) initiated had attained a certain pro-Hindu Vedic and Vedantic affiliation at the hands of Dwarakanath's son Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905); who, especially after the schism in the Brahmo Samaj in 1867, formed the Adi Brahmo Samaj primarily under his own leadership.<sup>4</sup> This Adi Brahmo Samaj profoundly influenced the subsequent development of Debendranath's youngest son Rabindranath as a versatile creative personality of the twentieth century India. In this chapter we will try to understand and study the role and contribution of Rabindranath and the Neo-Bengal School of Art in the development of Santiniketan architecture during the first four decades of the last century.

### **The Tagores of No. 5 and No. 6 Prince Dwarkanath Tagore's Lane, Jorasanko, Kolkata**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, during the formative years of Indian modernism, the Tagores of Jorasanko – both the Brahmo and the Hindu branch of the family – through their enlightened philosophy and eclecticism tried to help India to create its own identity in education, art, literature, music, drama and architecture. However, the Tagores were not alone in promulgating a new theory on social evolution and a man's position in the natural world. Some people in England, among them Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), the Scottish biologist, environmentalist and urban planner, were concerned with the emerging burdens of over-industrialization and the possibilities of sociology in tackling the problem. Geddes had a close interaction with the Tagores of Jorasanko.

The Tagore family lived in two separate but adjacent houses in Prince Dwarkanath Tagore's Lane, in the Jorasanko locality of North Kolkata. House no. 6 was occupied by Debendranath Tagore with his family, and consequently was Brahmo in culture and belief, while in



house no. 5 lived the three scions of Girindranath Tagore, and his son Gunendranath Tagore. They were Gaganendranath Tagore (1867–1938), Samarendranath Tagore (1870–1951) and Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) – the Hindu branch of the family.<sup>5</sup>

This family's contributions to the field of literature, art, aesthetics and architecture are relevant aspects of our common cultural past. In this regard, Rabindranath's experiments in education, art and architecture at his Santiniketan School – originally named Bolpur Brahmacharyashrama – and that of his nephews Gaganendranath and Abanindranath Tagore's Neo-Bengal School of Art Movement, started around 1905, deserve a special mention. Chronologically, much before Santiniketan shot into prominence as the cultural arena of the twentieth century India, the family of Gagan-Samar-Aban had initiated the process of cross-cultural fusion and assimilation of ideas at their Jorasanko house.

As early as 1913–14 and just prior to the World War I, Rabindranath 'culled' a series of his discourses meant for his students at Santiniketan School,<sup>6</sup> to write in *Sadhana*:

The west seems to take a pride in thinking that it is subduing nature, as if we are living in a hostile world where we have to wrest everything we want from an unwilling and alien arrangement of things .... But in India the point of view was different, it included the world with the man as one great truth. India puts all her emphasis on the harmony that exists between the individual and the universal.<sup>7</sup>

It is primarily this ideal that was sustained, later on, in the architectural idiom as developed at Santiniketan.<sup>8</sup>

### **Santiniketan Architecture and Inputs from the Neo-Bengal School**

What we see today as the fine examples of the typical Santiniketan style of architecture are primarily three major clusters of buildings in the Visva-Bharati University campus, and a number of private residences which are contemporaneous with the period of architectural growth in



the poet's residence complex at Uttarayana or the core Ashrama area. The main institutional buildings and the poet Tagore's residential houses at Santiniketan are situated at three major locations, which are as follows:

1. The Ashrama group
2. The Uttarayana group
3. The Kala Bhavana group

Later, we shall describe all these clusters individually and elucidate their relationship to each other.

Rabindranath's early thoughts on living and on an ideal seat of learning had been influenced by Upanishadic concepts of forest-dwelling Indian thinkers/seekers in their austere hutments surrounded by silence, peace and isolation under the umbrella of an immense star-studded tropical sky. In several of his reminiscences, Tagore narrated his boyhood experiences at Santiniketan and in the Himalayas, where he travelled with his father Debendranath. These early journeys into natural desolation left lasting impressions on young Rabindranath's mind.<sup>9</sup> Architecture being an integral and constituent part of the man-environment relationship, at Santiniketan it bore the deep influence of his philosophy.

On the other hand, at the turn of the last century when Rabindranath was formulating his ideas on the man-environment relationship, physical space and perhaps an ideal architecture, his nephews Gaganendranath and Abanindranath, with the help and encouragement from some noted European connoisseurs of traditional Indian art, had established the Indian Society of Oriental Art (ISOA) in 1907. This society was the much-needed platform for a band of young disciples of Abanindranath, who later on came to be known as the Neo-Bengal School artists.

Around 1909-10 came Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), the scholar and 'cultural hybrid'.<sup>10</sup> During his prolonged stay at Jorasanko, and with the assistance from Nandalal Bose (1883-1966), Coomaraswamy prepared a meticulously descriptive catalogue of the famous 'Tagore Collection' of traditional Indian art belonging to Gaganendranath, Samarendranath and Abanindranath Tagore.<sup>11</sup> This collection, along with the extremely rich personal library of



House no. 5, which had a wide representation of traditional Rajput, Kangra and Mughal miniatures, were regularly consulted by many of the Neo-Bengal School artists and aspiring art students to gain an insight into the visual representations of traditional Indian art in general and architecture in particular.<sup>12</sup> In 1914–15, Patrick Geddes had contacted Abanindranath for indigenous designs and architecture of eastern Indian thatched cottages.<sup>13</sup> Abanindranath, in turn, entrusted the job to two of his students – Sarada Ukil (1889–1940) and Mukul Dey (1895–1989) – and sent them on a drawing-cum-photographic fieldwork to Krishnanagar the same year.<sup>14</sup>

Here it should also be mentioned that the Tagore family of Jorasanko had formed the Bichitra Society in their Kolkata house. The effort had not only provided young artistic talents with a platform, but also encouraged them to experiment and disseminate their ideas among a wider public. The founding members of the Bichitra Society were Nandalal Bose, Asit Kumar Haldar (1890–1964) and Mukul Dey.<sup>15</sup> While Nandalal, Asit Haldar and Surendranath practised painting at Bichitra, Mukul Dey experimented in drypoint and etching,<sup>16</sup> and Narayan Kasinath Deval was doing clay modelling.<sup>17</sup> Bichitra lasted for only about one-and-half years, yet its contribution had an enduring influence on the Indian art scenario for the next 50 years, which spawned the Kala Bhavana in Santiniketan and the development of a unique style of architecture there.

Thus in 1917, when Abanindranath's other prominent disciple artist Surendranath Kar (1892–1970), later on the chief planner and designer of Santiniketan architecture, had joined Tagore's Ashrama, he was more than ready to translate Rabindranath's thoughts on ideal and aesthetically pleasing human habitation into a solid structural shape.

It is important to note that, prior to Surendranath Kar, the architecture of Santiniketan was strangely devoid of any direct flavour of Indianness. True, some Bangla-type thatched cottages existed,<sup>18</sup> but the two most prominent structures, the Santiniketan guest house and the stained-glass Mandir or prayer-hall, exuded strong influences of Western design and craftsmanship. The former displays a mixture of Doric and Ionic Order, complete with Doric columns topped with spiralling Ionic capitals, pediments, entablature, Venetian blinds on the windows<sup>19</sup> and a covered portico at the southern entrance to the double-



storied building. The stained-glass Mandir, on the other hand, with its tiled roof, marble floor, cast iron fence and gates, and lead came and copper foil stained-glass decoration is a strange cross between traditional European cathedrals and a marbled Hindu temple.

With the coming of Surendranath Kar, and later in 1918–19 of Nandalal Bose, Santiniketan architecture imbibed a distinct character which was partly influenced by classical Hindu-Buddhist temples, *chaityas* (halls covering *stupas*, made of bricks or rock cut) and *viharas* (monasteries constructed with brick or excavated from rocks), as of Ajanta and Karle in the Deccan Maharashtra, Jogimara in Sarguja, Chhattisgarh,<sup>20</sup> and Lomas Rishi Caves in Jahanabad district near Bodhgaya; and partly by Turco-Afghan, Indo-Saracenic, Mughal and Bundelkhand-style, with roofless enclosure having door and window apertures, sloping walls, cornice and ornamental niche on the interior and exterior wall surface. What is most interesting is perhaps the introduction of a typical style of roof laying, where instead of a single level of roof for the entire structure, it was done in multiple levels, as if in congruence with the undulating stark landscape found around Santiniketan then.

Into this melting pot of architectural styles and aesthetics were added liberal inputs from Japan, China, Java, Bali and Sri Lanka. Rabindranath, ever eager and extremely receptive towards cross-cultural ideas and methods, had invariably included artists and scholars in his travel groups to foreign lands.

This conscious selection, its subsequent amalgamation and finally the application of particular styles of architecture, essentially Asian in origin, was fundamentally the triumph of Abanindranath's Neo-Bengal School over the forces of occidental colonial imperialism, which had successfully infiltrated our aesthetic concepts and the Indian cultural arena in general.

### **Surendranath Kar: The Chief Designer/Architect of Santiniketan**

As mentioned earlier, Surendranath joined Santiniketan in 1917 and was initially appointed as a drawing master to the students of Brahmacharyashrama. Soon Rabindranath recognized and appreciated





his qualities as an architectural designer and took him to various places in India and abroad.<sup>21</sup>

Santiniketan never had a tall vertical structure due to two basic reasons. One, the thinkers never wanted to break the line of expansive horizon with the introduction of man-made vertical incongruity; and, secondly, the material resources of Santiniketan Ashrama never allowed them to build big structures. During those early years, Santiniketan could not retain the services of a trained and professional architect, and it was artist Surendranath who had to step into that void. Primarily, he designed two basic types of architecture. Firstly, the institutional buildings of the emerging Visva-Bharati University from 1921–22 onwards like the students' boarding houses and teachers' residences; and secondly, the poet's various abodes, located within a compound generally called Uttarayana. It should be noted that most of the institutional buildings and Tagore's various personal abodes had specific names attached to them, ascribing a distinct identity to each.

Around all the institutional constructions was kept a large expanse of open space, keeping in mind the tropical climate of Santiniketan. The buildings were adorned with open verandas, and front and rear courtyards in accordance with traditional Indian Bangla-type thatched cottages. In many cases, the front courtyard was encircled by a low parapet-like structure, which doubled as a seat to sit in the open during the summer evenings or to enjoy the warmth of a winter sun. Such a sitting arrangement may have been a direct adaptation from the eastern temple architectural plan. On the other hand, the front courtyards might have been more secular in their origin – something similar to the Mughal courtyards and enclosed gardens with platforms, which are known as *achabal* or *chabutra*.<sup>22</sup> Keeping in congruence with the surroundings and general character of the constructions, decorative lintels – similar to those of Ibrahim Rauza at Bijapur (in Karnataka),<sup>23</sup> but miniature in dimension – were incorporated in many of the buildings.

Similar lintels are found in one of the Kala Bhavana hostels. This particular hostel may have been constructed under the distinct influence of ancient Indian cave temples. A flight of stairs leads to a covered and pillared veranda. The entire ceiling and the walls of the veranda are decorated with murals by Binodebehari Mukhopadhyay (1904–1980) based on the themes of local life in and around Santiniketan. In this



connection, one recalls the mural decorations at Ajanta, where subjects from the daily life were depicted in the murals in Cave no. 17.

Surendranath also designed small integrated quarters for the Visva-Bharati teachers. In more than one instance, the quarters were clustered in the shape of a 'U' to enhance the interaction between the occupants, to inculcate the feeling of a greater family.

In the year 1928, Surendranath designed and supervised the building of Simhasadana – then the university auditorium. The architecture of this construction distinctly bears the influence of Atala Mosque of Jaunpur (in Uttar Pradesh).<sup>24</sup> The domineering façade with an arched gateway and multiple niches presently bears the bell-tower of the Ashrama. On either side of the imposing Simhasadana are arched and niched ornamental gateways or 'Toranas', the Purva-Torana and Paschim-Torana or the eastern gateway and the western gateway. However, interestingly, they do not possess an east-west orientation of entrances. They provide a unique symmetrical stability to the central building of Simhasadana.

If the geographical centre of the Ashrama is the Gour-Prangana or the central open space at the heart of the Ashrama, so essential in Tagore's philosophy; then to its immediate north is the Shal-Bithi or the avenue lined with rustic and ancient Shorea Robusta, leading first to the Ghanta-tala<sup>25</sup> and Madhabi-Bitan,<sup>26</sup> both under a massive banyan tree; and then finally to the old library building (presently the principal's office of Patha-Bhavana) and the Valabhi-Kutir<sup>27</sup> on its second storey. This building has an open south-facing covered veranda, profusely decorated with the frescoes in Jaipur style by Nandalal Bose and his students – which doubles as the raised stage from where the morning prayer service or *Baitalik* is performed every morning with Vedic hymns and Rabindra-sangeet. In this context it is pertinent to note that prior to joining Santiniketan, Nandalal Bose, along with Asit Kumar Haldar and K. Venkatappa, had joined Christiana J. Herringham's team to Ajanta in 1909–1910.<sup>28</sup> The direct education these artists had acquired from the relics of the Indian cultural past proved invaluable in their future career and aesthetic output.

Surendranath's architecture had transformed and adapted a number of elements directly from nature. Various floral patterns were transformed into architectural designs very successfully. On the path leading towards Gurupalli,<sup>29</sup> and right after Nichu Bangla – where



Tagore's eldest brother Dwijendranath Tagore (1840–1926) once lived – is a structure built to provide water to stray birds. Here the receptacle was constructed in the design of a blossoming lotus flower.

However, what is perceived generally as successful convergence of beauty with usefulness has its critics as well, and their views merit an inquirer's notice. Noted littérateur Buddhadeva Bose (1908–1974) visited Santiniketan during the last year of Tagore's life (1940–1941) and he had not a good word to say for the architecture there as far as its utility aspects were concerned:

Strangely enough, except for Udayan, the old guest house [i. e., Santiniketan house] and the Ratan-Kuthi, none of the houses in Santiniketan were built to combat the heat. In these three houses, the ceilings are high, the rooms spacious. In other houses, aesthetics has taken over comfort. The small, low houses are pretty, their cadence in tune to the endless expanses, like low mounds spread over the landscape, they do not break the line of the horizon. This would not have evoked comment had the houses served a mere decorative purpose, and the householder could have spent his days and nights outside. True, in Santiniketan, life is spent in the open as far as possible, even the lessons in the schools and colleges are taught in the shades of the trees; but even then certain tasks or weather conditions make it necessary to stay indoors some of the time at least. But the insides of the houses are more suited to the hills; the ceilings are low, the rooms tiny. No doubt the interiors are comfortable in winter. But, in summer time? And in our country, the winter is a fleeting visitor, the summer long lasting.<sup>30</sup>

Though Surendranath was aware of the needs of the purpose and utility, as an artist trained in the refined tastes of the Neo-Bengal School, the demands of a sound and pleasing design had taken priority over utility and comfort. Therefore, in most of his works, a certain sense of structural design is displayed with a clear loyalty towards the traditional forms of Hindu–Buddhist and Islamic architecture, which were never short of innovation. In this regard, he was always conscious and forever alive to the intrinsic characteristics of the local Birbhum landscape with



a wide open horizon, which in Santiniketan, was never broken by the introduction of any tall and vertical architectural structures. As far as methods were concerned, Santiniketan architecture is a glowing tribute to various indigenous forms of house-building, with a flow of constant conscious experimentation. Thus we find the introduction of damp and termite-proof super-coating with coal tar and roof laying with locally available pebbles from eroded lands, having a subsequent rammed mortar and lime waterproof super-layer on them. In all the mud houses of Santiniketan Ashrama, the mud was prepared traditionally with the introduction of chopped natural fibres in it for more effective adhesion of the material. Similarly, in most of the cases, the buildings were constructed with the locally available labour, thus creating a greater dissemination of aesthetic and technical knowledge in the population.

Another important institutional building designed by Surendranath is the old Nandan, to house the Kala Bhavana classes. Here, he had introduced two vertical air ducts to induce the southern breeze during the oppressive heat of the summer months. The introduction of the air ducts was an innovation from the architecture of Sindh and the Middle East. Apart from this, some ingenious usage of natural sunlight was introduced by constructing light passages as of Javanese origin. These special skylights have a sloping base to facilitate the easy passage of natural light. The construction of the Nandan started in 1923 and was completed after six years.

Adjacent to the Nandan is the Havell Hall.<sup>31</sup> This memorial hall, which was used as exhibition premises, was constructed in 1938. It was planned with an adequate open space left in front of the building. Havell Hall, actually its predecessor Nandan, has a powerful bas-relief by Nandalal, depicting Mahatma Gandhi's salt march to Dandi on its right wall. However, much of the building's charm has been lost forever due to poor maintenance and subsequent vulgar additions and alterations.

Apart from these, the other two examples of simplification of traditional architecture are found in the plans of Hindi-Bhavana<sup>32</sup> and Cheena-Bhavana<sup>33</sup>. These bear a striking resemblance to Daulat Khana or Emperor Akbar's private chambers at Fatehpur Sikri near Agra.

Irrespective of the institutional or Tagore's own residential constructions, we notice a tiered break-up of the vertical plane in



Surendranath's architecture. This has some similarity with the likes of Dhamek Stupa at Sarnath in Uttar Pradesh (*circa* A.D. 500) and Prasat Kravan (*circa* A.D. 921) at Angkor in Cambodia.<sup>34</sup>

The Black-House is an ingenious member of the Kala Bhavana group of buildings. Though the architecture was designed by Nandalal Bose, and not Surendranath, it shows striking assimilation of cross-cultural ideas with purely indigenous building material – such as mud and natural fibre construction with clay bonding and plaster, super-coated with several washes of coal tar to make the building damp-proof. The external walls of the construction are profusely decorated with bas-reliefs of Bharhut (in Madhya Pradesh) and Mahabalipuram (in Tamil Nadu), and Egyptian and Assyrian motifs by Kala Bhavana students.

Another member of the Ashrama group of buildings is known as Dinantika Cha-Chakra or the tea club. Rabindranath, as a result of his own travels, was aware of the deep religious and cultural significance of tea in China and Japan, where he had observed culturally rich ritual aspects of tea drinking.<sup>35</sup> Cha-Chakra is an octagonal building on a little elevation from the ground level. However, the elevation is not as high as a second floor. The single octagonal room is approached by a flight of steps leading to the entrance door. The interior is lit and ventilated by a series of open windows on the facets of the octagon, while the sitting arrangement is a simple skirting of a built-in continuous bench, which clings to the interior wall. This peculiar sitting arrangement was done to facilitate a frontal face-to-face communication between the members of the club. The ceiling and the upper portion of the walls are decorated with murals in Jaipur-style fresco works. At the ground level, Dinantika Cha-Chakra has a small room where tea is brewed and served upstairs.

### Uttarayana<sup>36</sup> and Rabindranath

Rabindranath never liked to live in the same house for long – the Uttarayana Complex owes its existence to this idiosyncrasy of Tagore. The Uttarayana occupies a sprawling compound where five separate residences of Tagore are located, along with a rose garden, an artificial pond of water lilies, a built-up island with weeping willows, an antique sitting bench and complete with a Japanese copper/bronze *Ishidoro*.<sup>37</sup>



Surendranath Kar was not the sole architect of the Uttarayana; both he and Rathindranath Tagore (1888–1961), the Poet's son, had visualized and designed the different houses together, while the construction was mostly done by Birendramohan Sen (1900–1969). The old Ashramites remembered fondly<sup>38</sup> how Birendramohan Sen would go to the nearby village of Illumbazar to collect moulds of the ancient terracotta ornamentations found on temple walls, so that tiles could be fabricated out of these to decorate the walls of the buildings; or how Birendramohan was initiated into the craft of construction by making him hold the simple line with the plumb bob by Surendranath and Rathindranath during the days of his apprenticeship at Uttarayana. The guiding spirit behind all these men (who were never professional architects or civil engineers) was Tagore, who could infuse them with enough enthusiasm and drive. This was another positive aspect of his original method of education wherein he always tried and succeeded in bringing out the best of the latent qualities in men.

The names of the five houses in the Uttarayana Complex where Tagore resided periodically are: Udayan, Konarka, Shyamali, Punashcha and Udichi.

Keeping in mind the unhindered horizon line of the Santiniketan landscape, the Uttarayana grew up gradually on a horizontal plane – in tune with the subtle wave-like undulations of the *Khoai*<sup>39</sup> around. It is easy to imagine that in the past, amid the ups and downs of an arid landscape, this architectural group had achieved a flavour quite akin to sculpture.

Udayan, the largest in the Uttarayana cluster of houses, was built gradually from 1919 onwards till 1929. Here the floors and the roofs were laid in different planes, resulting in a unique experience of living in the interiors. Within this basic ingenuity of design were added the internal woodwork, furniture, tapestry and especially the windows to let in light and breeze – essential prerequisites of a tropical existence. At the entrance there is a protruding covered veranda, balanced by the symmetry of two spacious open verandas flanking the sides. The entrance door is a wooden one, with carvings on it. The pillars that support the roof of the veranda are styled as a fusion of ancient Indian cave monastery pillars and various styles of *jharokhas*<sup>40</sup> as found on some of the old *havelis*<sup>41</sup> at Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Curiously, this veranda has



some resemblance to the Chinese summer theatres as well. In fact, many of Tagore's own plays were staged right here once upon a time.

On the second floor, Udayan has a number of pillars to facilitate a more horizontal construction in symmetry with the total structure and the landscape in general. Similarly, the stairs leading to the third floor are in keeping with both beauty and utility. On the ground floor, at the front and back, are sets of wooden railings, which reminds one of the Angkor Wat (a temple in Cambodia) to some extent. The main room on the ground floor displays a wooden ceiling and interior pillars – something similar to the caves of Ajanta, Bagh<sup>42</sup> and Ellora.

Though Udayan has a striking resemblance with the ancient Hindu-Buddhist architecture of India, the use of timber panelling and interior wooden pillars is essentially Japanese in flavour.<sup>43</sup> In this regard it is relevant to remember the lasting impression of Tomitaro Hara's *Sankeien* on Tagore's mind.<sup>44</sup> In fact, in 1916 he wrote to Rathindranath from this place about how keenly he wished to carry a whole traditional Japanese house, complete with all its furniture, back to India with him!<sup>45</sup> In this context it is also pertinent to remember that these buildings at Uttarayana Complex were raised in an era that was strongly nationalistic and anti-British. Hence, here the influence of Abanindranath Tagore's Neo-Bengal School got a very favourable ground to strike roots through the medium of architecture at Santiniketan.<sup>46</sup>

About Udayan, Buddhadev Bose observed: 'From the architectural point of view, and that of comfort as well, it goes without saying that the best building in Santiniketan is the Udayan. One day, Rathindranath showed us around his mansion. It was a worthy experience. Amidst all the angles, curves and elevations, there was to it a balance, an unmarred grace that was clearly visible outside, and to be easily felt inside. Besides, a vast number of paintings and artworks adorned the interiors .... The bedroom was open on three sides – the north, south and west; and it was the western view that was so enchanting. The bare terrain stretched to the horizon; there was nothing to spoil the vista of the north-western corner where clouds appear and from where the rain charges in. This room should have been named Shaoni after the monsoons; what a room it would be to watch the rains!... Rathibabu told us that it was a fascinating experience to watch the giant-sized clouds appear in the corner and come rushing in.'





The dwelling of Konarka<sup>47</sup> gradually took its present shape out of a thatched cottage that had rammed earth flooring with *kankar* nodules<sup>48</sup>, and mud walls with slit-bamboo interior partitions. In this house, the floors and roofs are not on one uniform plane. Due to this interplay of the various planes, there is a possibility of establishing direct contact with the outdoor nature from almost all possible angles – especially with the sky and the landscape around. This single-floor house has altogether 14 planes of roofs on the top. Since the roofs are at different planes, small staircases are introduced to commute from one rooftop to another. Konarka has a grand porch, which doubled as a stage and an extended drawing room at times. It is rather curious that how, in many of the Tagore houses, the elements of a stage décor had somehow infiltrated into their private existence. Whether this is of any psychological significance only the experts can tell.

By the side of Konarka is a large expanse of a flat and cemented raised platform. Such platforms are also found elsewhere in the Uttarayana Complex. These have low elevation flat-roofed *chhatri*-type (umbrella) pavilions on them. Similar pavilions are seen at Fatehpur Sikri as well. The walls of these pavilions in some instances bear decorations in low bas-relief style. In 1934, Nandalal Bose designed a unique *chaitya*-style construction, which was used as an artwork display housing. This was constructed under the supervision of Surendranath Kar. According to artist Sisir Kumar Ghosh, this unique housing, which was called Chaitya, was originally constructed by a Javanese student Rosli, another fellow student Rameshwar Prasad Shukla and Ghosh himself. The raw materials used were locally prepared and mud impregnated with chopped jute and other fibres to provide adhesion, and finally painted on partially with black coal tar to provide water-proofing, as well as to enhance the aesthetic appeal to contrast it against the predominant yellow ochre of the local Birbhum clay.<sup>49</sup>

Rabindranath was so impressed with the Chaitya that he wished a similar mud hut to be built for his residence. Thus came up Shyamali in the year 1935. Though a mud hut in its constructional aspect, Shyamali has its originalities too. The house has a front courtyard and a *pradakshina* or circumambulatory passage in the interior. There is some controversy regarding the construction of walls in Shyamali. Some are of the opinion





that the walls are kept hollow by embedding earthen pitchers inside – for better thermal insulation. At places a certain usage of retaining walls is noticed. On its exterior, Shyamali has a number of bas-reliefs by Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij, based on historical, as well as motifs from the Indian daily life – making it an unparalleled interface between sculpture and architecture.

About this mud house, Tagore was expressive. In his own words:

I have built with mud a shelter for my last hours  
And have named it Shyamali.  
I have built it  
On the dust of this earth  
Which buries in it  
All sufferings  
And cleanses  
All stains.

Shyamali has a certain frontality, which is essentially a characteristic of ancient Buddhist cave architecture. The same frontality is also the essence of the traditional Indian sculpture. Quite like Udayan, it does not convey the same visual congruence if viewed from the rear, while the *dvarapala*<sup>50</sup> bas-relief near the entrance reminds one of the Pitalkhora caves in Aurangabad District (in Maharashtra) and Guntupalli *chaityas* in Andhra Pradesh. The application of retaining walls is also found at these places.

The interior of Shyamali is most ingeniously designed. It is divided by low walls that sculpt or carve the negative space of an empty room into several enclosures for living and reposing quarters – yet these walls do not reach up to the ceiling level. Therefore, it is best to say that Shyamali encloses a single unified space, which was given a series of shapes without destroying its inherent malleability. From the main entrance to the Uttarayana Complex, the path leads directly to Shyamali, through a creeper bower. Such types of bowers are seen in other locations in Uttarayana and in the Ashrama as well. For example, the bower at Madhabi-Bitan as mentioned earlier in the chapter.

Just a year later, in 1936, a fourth house called Punashcha was built near Shyamali – little to its east. According to Tagore's wish, the



eastern part of this architecture was glassed and the west face was walled up. But like Konarka, Punashcha had its own evolution as well. Currently, at its interior we find the application of retaining walls. The main room inside has a ceiling higher than other rooms and here a skylight was used. A specialty of this building is a semi-circular and attached courtyard in the front, which is partially enclosed by the arms of a low wall, extending from the building towards the courtyard periphery – complete with windows having shutters in it. Quite like Shyamali, here too, the intrinsic malleability of a natural physical space was adapted to a man's use, without losing contact with the essential natural elements around. In this regard, it has some conceptual resemblance with unroofed, walled courtyards of Jahangiri Mahal at Orchha (in Madhya Pradesh), pierced with latticework screens.

After about two years of living in Punashcha, Rabindranath again had the urge to have a new house made for him. Thus, the fifth and the last house, Udichi<sup>51</sup> came up a little towards the south-east of Punashcha in the year 1938. The house stands on four short pillars covered by latticework. The first floor living room of Udichi is encircled by a series of glass-paned windows, which establishes a direct contact with the nature around. A covered veranda skirts this room as well. The flight of steps with a railing that leads to this floor is unique in character – it does not give the idea of apparent gain of elevation. The handrails too are not abrupt, and help the visitor to gain elevation in harmony with the low flight of steps. These stairs with guardrails could have been an influence from Pao-Ho-Tien or the Hall of Preserving Harmony at the Forbidden City in Beijing, China.

At Udichi, the stairs lead to a little covered veranda, which has glass windows and a small sitting platform of low elevation. Udichi is lower in height than the normal concept of a two-storey house. Its windows at the first floor are small, yet not disproportionate to the building. The interior of this house is strangely personal – for its elevation helps to gain a vision, yet not restricting the dweller in a tower-like isolation. This was possible only because of its low elevation and open windows.

During the centenary celebrations of Tagore in 1961, the last of the Uttarayana buildings came up in the complex. This was called Bichitra, and was built to house the Rabindra-Bhavana archives. As before, Surendranath was also its architect. The construction



incorporated striking *gharokha*<sup>52</sup> balconies in Bijapur style; while the main entrance displays influence from Aihole in Karnataka.

Thus, at Santiniketan evolved a style of architecture that was essentially eclectic in appearance and aesthetically pleasing – if not always very practical. Keeping in tune with Rabindranath's thoughts and ideas on man-made space amid an inherently horizontal landscape, this architecture was a conscious effort to converge indigenous design with utility and locally available material. In this manner Surendranath Kar, Rathindranath Tagore and others tried to blend aspects of traditional Indian architecture with Tagorean concepts of spatial existence to create new idioms in architectural expression.

### Postscript

In India, the Santiniketan style of architecture tried to bring back a sense of Indianness and tradition of expression in an era when our ancestors rather willingly accepted and welcomed the cultural onslaught from alien imperialist forces. In reversing this scenario of intellectual bankruptcy, the role of Rabindranath Tagore and the Neo-Bengal School of Abanindranath and his disciples cannot be exaggerated.

The new style of architectural design and construction that came up at Santiniketan is extremely important in the study of our modern cultural heritage.

In recent times, various societies in the world are forced to take into cognizance several practical aspects of human existence in relation to our immediate natural environment and ecology in general. For example, we need to achieve a natural balance between various environments, build rural infrastructure towards achieving this and initiate newer thoughts regarding earth architecture, with adequate local participation in any urban planning and its application. In such lines of thought and queries, the Santiniketan style of designing and architecture strove to find workable solutions in India. True, seven decades after these buildings were designed and erected, India has experienced an enormous population boom and a consequent change in her urban skyline; thus, the essential horizontality of the Santiniketan dwellings may be perceived as merely utopian in flavour and quality. However, as the intention behind the development of this architecture was a conscious



effort to introduce positive and practical aesthetics into our regular existence, its study and preservation undoubtedly merit consideration.

#### Notes and References

1. Sivnath Sastri, *History of the Brahmo Samaj*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Calcutta, 1919, p. 2 and draft of the Trust Deed, in Appendix A, R. Chatterji, Cornwallis St., Calcutta.
2. Gauri Shankar Bhatt, 'Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and the Church-Sect Typology', *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Autumn 1968, Religious Research Association, Inc., p. 24.
3. K. C. Vyas, *Social Renaissance in India*, Vora & Co., Bombay, 1957, pp. 16, 19. Quoted by Gauri Shankar Bhatt, 'Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and the Church-Sect Typology', p. 24.
4. Gauri Shankar Bhatt, Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and the Church-Sect Typology', pp. 24–25.
5. Mukul Dey, 'Abanindranath Tagore: A Survey of the Master's Life and Work', *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Abanindra Number, May–October, 1942.
6. Rabindranath Tagore, *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, Macmillan & Co., London, 1914, Author's Preface, pp. viii–ix.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
8. Samit Das, *Santiniketan Sthapatya O Surendranath Kar*, M. Fine Arts Dissertation No. 17, Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, 1996, p. 1.
9. Rabindranath Tagore, *Jiban-smriti*, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, 1912.
10. Mary Lago's review of Coomaraswamy, Volume III, *His Life and Work* by Roger Lipsey. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 39, No. 1, November 1979, pp. 207–09.
11. (a). Original Tagore Collection Catalogue in Mukul Dey Archives, Santiniketan; (b). *Rupam*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1920; (c). Panchanan Mondal, *Bharatshilpi Nandalal*, Vol. 1, Pallisri Granthagar, Santiniketan, 1982, pp. 214–15, 224; and (d). Satyasri Ukil, *Tagore Collection of Old Indian Paintings and Objects of Art, Art & Deal*, September–October 2000, pp. 32–35.
12. Mukul Dey, *Amar Katha*, Visva-Bharati, 1402, Bangabda (corresponding to Christian era. 1995), p. 28.
13. 'He [Geddes] produced Town Planning Reports for fifty Indian cities, the most important being his Indore Report, published in 1918. In these



reports he followed the form developed in his Dumfermline Report of incorporating practice and theory together in the context of specific problems' – see H. E. Meller and Patrick Geddes; 'An Analysis of his Theory of Civics', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3, March 1973, p. 293.

14. Mukul Dey, *Amar Katha*, pp. 43–45.
15. Panchanan Mondal, *Bharatshilpi Nandalal*, December 1982, pp. 399–401, 403, 405, 406.
16. Mukul Dey, *Japan Theke Jorasanko: Chithi O Dinalipi* (1916–17), edited by Satyasri Ukil, New Age Publishers, Kolkata, January 2005, pp. 79–84, 208–209.
17. Narayan Kasinath Deval was an early student of Santiniketan. Brahmacharyashrama of Maharashtrian and Burmese parentage. In 1917 he, along with Mukul Dey, shared a studio in Bhubandanga Village near Santiniketan (see *Japan Theke Jorasanko*, p. 223, annotation number 67). Around 1918 and after the dissolution of Bichitra Society, Deval had to join the Besant Theosophical College at Madanapalli (in Andhra Pradesh), where Irish poet James H. Cousins was the principal then.
18. For the names and description of some of the pre-Surendranath architecture of Santiniketan, such as Utaja, Taladhvaj, Gurudham, Nutan-Bari, and maybe Mrinmoyee, please consult Dhiren Krishna Deb Barma, *Smritipatey*, Gabeshana-Prakashan Bibhag, Visva-Bharati, December 1991, pp. 87, 89, 105, 107 and 115–16.
19. Venetian blinds were patented by Edward Beran in London on 11 December 1769.
20. Amalananda Ghosh, *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, Brill Academic Publishers, Massachusetts, 1991, p. 292.
21. a). *Ibid.*, pp. 209–10; b). Sisir Kumar Ghosh, *Amar Paoa Santiniketan*, Prakashani, Kolkata, October 1986, p. 45.
22. *Achabal* or *chabutra* are open platforms, mostly located within a garden, where birds are given grains to eat. Many believe that the word *chabutra* is a derivative of *kabutar* – a pigeon.
23. Ibrahim Rauza of Bijapur consists of the tomb and mosque of Ibrahim Adil Shah II (1580–1627).
24. Atala Mosque was built in 1408 C. E., after the independence of Jaunpur from the rule of the Delhi Sultanate and the establishment of the Sharqi Dynasty.
25. Old gong platform, fashioned like an ancient gateway. It was one of the earliest constructions by Surendranath Kar. There was a massive metal bell, which was stolen in the late 1970s. Investigations bore no results.



26. An arbor or bower over an ancient gateway with *madhabi* creeper intertwined on an arched iron frame.
27. Literally, 'roof-cottage' (*valabhi* = roof, *kutir* or *kuti* = cottage), see Prasanna Kumar Acharya, *A Dictionary of Hindu Architecture*, Oxford University Press, Allahabad, 1926, pp. 378-79, 135. For the full description of the Santiniketan building, which was used as a hostel about a century ago, see Sudhiranjan Das, *Amader Santiniketan*, Visva-Bharati, 1987, p. 77, and Dhiren Krishna Deb Barma, *Smritipatey*, Visva-Bharati, 1991, p. 210.
28. The Bengal School artists were almost coaxed to join Lady Herringham's team by Sister Nivedita, who had insisted that as modern Indian artists, Abanindranath's disciples should study the rich tradition of ancient Indian art heritage. See Christiana J. Herringham, *Ajanta Frescoes*, India Society, London, 1915, and Panchanan Mondal, *Bharatshilpi Nandalal*, Vol. 1, Santiniketan, 1982.
29. Gurupalli is the name of a locality, a little to the south of Santiniketan Ashrama. As the name implies, it was originally a cluster of thatched hutments where the teachers of the Santiniketan school lived. Nandalal Bose lived at the eastern extremity of Gurupalli in a thatched and double-storey Bangla-type cottage. See Dhiren Krishna Deb Barma, *Smritipatey*, Visva-Bharati, December 1991, p. 110.
30. Buddhadeva Bose, *Sab-peyechhir Deshe* (cover illustration by Ramendranath Chakraborty depicting Tagore's famous mud house Shyamali), Vikalp edition, Kolkata, 1998, Chapter 2. Translated from original Bengali by Nandini Gupta.
31. Named after Ernest Binfield Havell (1861-1934), a lover of Indian art, and principal of the Government School of Art, Calcutta during the last decade of the nineteenth century till circa 1905.
32. 'Hindi-Bhavana' or the centre of study of Hindi language and literature was initiated by the noted Hindi/Sanskrit scholar Hazariprasad Dwivedi (1907-79) in 1930s, when the scholar had joined Visva-Bharati.
33. Centre of Chinese Studies at Visva-Bharati. It was initiated by the efforts of the noted Chinese scholar Tan Yun-shan (1898-1983) in 1937.
34. Cf. illustrations of various ancient Buddhist stupas in Mark Aurel Stein, *On Alexander's Track to the Indus*, Macmillan and Co., London, 1929 (Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1992 reprint).
35. Cf. (a). Rabindranath Tagore, *Japan Jatri*, Visva-Bharati, 1974; (b). Mukul Dey, *Japan Theke Jorasanko: Chithi O Dinalipi*, pp. 26, 167-70; and (c). Panchanan Mondal, *Bharatshilpi Nandalal*, Vol. II, Santiniketan, 1984.



36. In Sanskrit, *Uttarayana* means the northern path (*uttara* = north, and *ayana* = path). The compound word denotes the progress of the Sun to the north of the equator or the summer solstice. In mystic philosophy, it represents in one sense the path of light leading inwards spiritually.
37. Typical Japanese lamp housing, kept outdoors, especially in gardens. Tomitaro Hara (1869–1939), the Japanese art lover and famous silk merchant of Yokohama, who hosted Tagore and his entourage for a number of weeks in 1916, had a very impressive collection of *Ishidoro* at his garden house named Sankeien. Cf. Mukul Dey, *Japan Theke Jorasanko: Chithi O Dinalipi* (1916–17), pp. 31–32, 175–82.
38. See *Ashramik Birendramohan*, Subarnarekha, Santiniketan, 2002, pp. 44–45 [Jamuna Sen's reminiscences] and pp. 62–63 [for Kshitish Roy's reminiscences].
39. *Khoai* is the colloquial Bengali for eroded land.
40. A Mughal term for a projecting covered balcony, often used for ceremonial appearances by the members of the royal family. Its use is noticed extensively in Mughal, Rajasthani, Bundelkhandi and Gujarati traditional architecture.
41. The term *haveli* is used by the Vaishnava sect to refer to their temples in Gujarat. Throughout North India such exclusive temples of Lord Krishna are called *havelis*.
42. Cf. (a) Christiana J. Herringham, *Ajanta Frescoes*, India Society, London, 1915; (b) Asit Kumar Halder, 'The Buddhist Caves of Bagh', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 43, No. 247, October 1923, Plates B, C and F; (c) Mukul Dey, *My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh*, George H. Doran Company, New York, 1925. Interestingly in Asit Kumar Halder's article, as cited, the author does not mention the names of his artist companions, who were Nandalal Bose and Surendranath Kar.
43. In *The Inner Harmony of the Japanese House* (Kodansha International, Tokyo, 1998), author Atsushi Ueda states that 'the history of Japanese architecture is the struggle with the pillar', much the same way as Le Corbusier said that Europe's architectural history was 'the struggle with the window'.
44. Sankeien is the name of an extraordinary residential complex of Japanese art lover and silk merchant Tomitaro Hara (1869–1939) of Yokohama. This was not exactly a garden house according to the general understanding of the term. Sankeien was more like a natural landscape, complete with three valleys of pine-clad hills, sea shore and a number of lotus and water lily ponds. Tomitaro was not only an ardent lover of



paintings, but also he most reverently collected specimens of traditional Japanese architecture and preserved these at his sprawling residential complex. See Mukul Dey, *Japan Theke Jorasanko: Chithi O Dinalipi*, pp. 31–32, 175–82.

45. Rabindranath Tagore, *Chithipatra*, Vol. 2, Visva-Bharati. Letter to Rathindranath Tagore from Sankeien, Yokohama, during August–September 1916.
46. See Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat Shilpa* (Kantik Press, Calcutta, circa 1907) for his interpretations of the so-called Oriental and Occidental art. This little monograph was the Srimadbhagavat Gita to the Neo-Bengal School artists.
47. 'This building of 18 rooms in 1919 [used] to be Tagore's residence. Its historical value lies in its being the venue for poetry-recitation by Tagore and rehearsals for his plays. It is now a permanent display gallery for visitors. Konark was restored by the ASI at a cost of Rs 12.23 lakhs in 2001'; Vide report of the High Level Committee appointed by the Paridarsaka (Visitor) of the Visva-Bharati University and the president of India, 2006.
48. 'Many varieties have been recognized in India of a calcareous laterite with large concretionary blocks of carbonate of lime is called kankar (kunkar) and has been much used in building bridges, &c. because it serves as a hydraulic cement.' *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1911.
49. See Sisir Kumar Ghosh, *Amar Paoa Santiniketan*, p. 55. To gain a first-hand idea of the present condition of this Santiniketan *chaitya*, one only needs to visit that location physically and see what they have done to this heritage architecture. Gone are the days when masters like Nandalal and Surendranath would be happy to work with mud and coal tar – the modern restorers raped the structure with hard cement plaster applied with a mason's spatula, rather than using their own hands to finish the restoration in a more soft and rounded manner, as seen on the mud huts of Bengal.
50. A *dvarapala* is a gate or door guardian statue in Buddhism.
51. 'Built in the year 1938 as a residence for Tagore, it comprises seven rooms and has floor area of 774 sq. ft. It is used at present for a permanent display for visitors. It urgently needs renovation.' High Level Committee's report on Visva-Bharati, 2006.
52. *Jharokhas* could be used both for adding to the architectural beauty of the building itself or for any specific purpose.