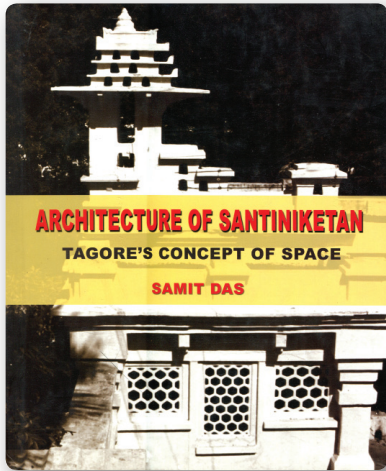


Book Review by Snehanshu Mukherjee

ARCHITECTURE OF SHANTINIKETAN

TAGORE'S CONCEPT OF SPACE



The old adage “never judge a book by its cover” is an apt phrase to describe the book under review. The cover of the book *Architecture of Santiniketan, Tagore's Concept of Space* authored by Samit Das has an intriguing black and white image of a “chimney of Udayana” – one of the important buildings at Santiniketan. Unfortunately, this image is severed through the middle by a bright yellow band that runs across the cover, while sporting the title in bright red raised lettering further accentuated by shadows! The cover, at least to my mind, does not seem compatible with either the aesthetic sensibilities or the ideology of Santiniketan and its architecture as presented within the book. Reading through the book is however a different and far more rewarding experience. It becomes apparent that this was indeed a “labour of love” for Samit Das, a result of over fifteen years of research and perseverance. The book, probably the first

in the English language, unravels for the reader the wonder of a radical experiment that created a unique “place” for the purpose of acquiring and imparting knowledge by one of the world's foremost thinkers and poets – who was renowned not just in his lifetime but who has continued to inspire mankind even 150 years after his birth.

There is a wealth of information that Das has culled from Tagore's writings and from the essays of those who were his close associates in the grand venture of creating Santiniketan in the wilderness of Birbhum. The Introduction to the book gives the author's reasons for taking forward his Master's Degree thesis at Kala Bhavan on the same subject to the present book. He identifies the unique position that Santiniketan enjoyed in the history of Bengal Renaissance. He states that “*Santiniketan's architecture perhaps acts as a metaphor, narrating in a concrete form the passage between tradition and modernity.*” He also adds that Santiniketan represents “...*the silent expression of the coming together of music, art, literature, poetry, letters, functional ornamentation, festivals and so on.*” While the architecture of Santiniketan may be thought of as a physical representation of the coming together of various art forms which typified Bengal Renaissance, the very act of collaboration between the Poet and his associates, who ranged from celebrated artists, musicians, writers and designers, was a unique process that built San-

Architecture of Santiniketan,
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tiniketan the way it is – an experiment that has possibly remained unparalleled in the world till date.

The book also records the involvement of trained architects and has images of blueprints of two buildings. However it is quite apparent that the influence of these professional architects was not too great in giving shape to the overall architecture of the place. The real architect was Tagore himself whose ideas were translated into reality by Surendranath Kar with substantial inputs from the famous artist Nandalal Bose, the then head of Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan. Residences built by Tagore's associates such as Pratima Devi, who lived at Santiniketan, also influenced Tagore's ideas on architecture, which he then went on to incorporate in his own structures.

Tagore was a restless person, always eager to experience new situations. He was never tired of travelling, which he did extensively, both within the country and across the world. Even when he was in residence at Santiniketan he got tired easily of his surroundings; this was probably the main reason that prompted him to build, between 1919 and 1938, four distinct houses adjacent to each other in the same compound. Of these, *Shyamali*, built in 1935, was the one which was directly influenced by Nandalal Bose's experimental exhibition hut called *Chaitya*. The artist in 1934 had created *Chaitya* in earth construction and painted it over in bitumen to make the surface water

repellant. The dark pigmentation of the mud walls probably influenced Tagore to name his new house *Shyamali* (the dusky one) even before construction was commenced. Surendranath Kar, the principal designer, is said to have derived the appearance of the house from an earlier poem by Tagore with the same name. *Shyamali*, like *Chaitya*, was constructed with earth and finished in bitumen; Nandalal Bose and his students devised and made the murals on the facades of the house. This collaborative endeavour was typical of all the main buildings of Santiniketan and is one of the primary themes highlighted by Samit Das in the book.

Tagore's interest in architecture before the conception of Santiniketan is evident from his writings and reaches back to his childhood experiences in his multi-layered ancestral house at Jorasanko, Kolkata and later from his travels across the globe. His interest in spaces and places are manifest in his different writings - in his songs, poems, letters and plays. The sets designed for his plays and dance dramas (often by Nandalal Bose and Abanindranath Tagore) that were enacted both at Jorasanko and at Santiniketan also provide us with an introduction to his sensibilities of form and space making. As the author states "*Indian(n)ess for him is not a blind adaptation of traditional techniques but an ingenious restructuring so that they may merge seamlessly with our lifestyle.*" This is also true of many of Tagore's songs where the melodic structure is influenced by varied sources that range from English hymns to Bengal's folk songs and Indian classical traditions.

The planning of Santiniketan could be said to be influenced by the theories propounded by Patrick Geddes as Tagore corresponded regularly with Geddes on the subject of his campus development.

Though Geddes did not work directly with Tagore, his son Arthur Geddes "*did some remarkable work*" at Santiniketan "*...besides conducting research on the rural environs.*" Das states that Arthur Geddes "*...drafted various plans from which Santiniketan emerged.*" Tagore's love for nature as witnessed in his songs and poems found expression in the landscaping of the barren but beautiful land form of Birbhum and its transformation into the verdant place that Santiniketan became. Tagore had devised a yearly *Vriksharopan Utsav*, a festival to plant trees. The planting of saplings were carried out by students and teachers, accompanied by dancing to songs penned by Tagore for the occasion. Beautifully designed palanquin-like constructions were decorated and used to carry the saplings during the function.

Through various quotes, the author manages to convey the infectious spirit, the excitement and euphoria that Santiniketan generated amongst its residents in its formative years. However, the extensive use of quotes by the author also has the drawback of becoming a means to compose entire pages with nothing but quotes. While these quotes may reinforce the main arguments put forth, it also shows poor editorial control. Ideas too, are repeated in almost the same words a few pages apart - something that is usually rectified by an experienced editor in any established publishing concern. A similar lack of attention to detail is visible in the quality of photographs printed. While one may expect some lack of clarity in archival images, the same should not be the condition in the photographs shot exclusively for the publication. There are several photographs from recent times, as for instance, the double-spread image of the *Khoai*, which are clearly "fuzzy". These un-

fortunate lacunas take away from the overall quality and relevance of this otherwise engrossing and important book.

The author in the last chapter discusses how Santiniketan today as a Central Government University has not been able to live up to Tagore's vision that had created the concept of *Viswa Bharati*. Many of the older buildings are in a state of neglect and disrepair. The subsequent buildings built on campus is best described as the standard PWD variety modernist "boxes" insensitive to the original buildings or even to the natural landscape of Santiniketan that had been nourished by Tagore, Kar, Bose and other like minded people in the past. But then this condition is endemic to many of our historic institutions and cultural spaces. However, this should have happened to Tagore's beloved Santiniketan in such a short time period makes it even more difficult to accept.

In the book is a quote from a letter written by Tagore where he speaks of an imaginary place, which probably best describes what he held as an idyllic space, "*If I have a garden on the banks of the Ganga and a cool, spotlessly clean, marbled room in one corner,...a couch to lean against, a desk for writing, and just the garden and the water and the sky for the rest - the fragrance of blossoming flowers and the chirping of birds - then I can silently discharge my duties as a poet. One can easily subsist on much less in this world, and not feel an ounce of happiness living on much more.*"
— Satara, 8th April 1895

This quote in many ways describes the essence of what he strived to achieve at Santiniketan, and to a large extent the book by Samit Das brings us close to understanding the wonder that was Santiniketan.

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