

Tagore's Ideas of Social Action and the Sriniketan Experiment of Rural Reconstruction, 1922–41

ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore's Institute for Rural Reconstruction based at Sriniketan was pioneering in its time and the culmination of his long period of endeavour to redeem the neglected Indian village and bridge the gap between the city and the village. He had two objectives: to educate the villagers in self-reliance and to bring back to the villages 'life in its completeness' with 'music and readings from the epics,' as in the 'past.' He recruited a stellar team of agronomists, rural health workers, and village-level teachers – notably Leonard Elmhirst from England and his own son, Rathindranath Tagore – who initiated many of the more successful elements basic to rural development work.

In my estate the river was far away and lack of water was a serious problem. I said to my tenants, 'if you dig a well, I shall get it cemented.' They replied, 'You want to fry the fish in the oil of the fish itself. If you dig a well you will go to heaven through the accumulated virtue of having provided water for the thirsty, while we shall have done the work.' The idea, obviously, was that an account of all such deeds was kept in heaven and while I, having earned great merit, could go to the seventh heaven, the village people would simply get some water.

Tagore, 'History and Ideals'¹

We have started in India, in connection with our Visva-Bharati, the work of village reconstruction. Its mission is to retard the process of racial suicide.

Tagore, 'City and Village'

Visva-Bharati's Institute of Rural Reconstruction, popularly known as Sriniketan [Abode of Prosperity], situated two miles away from the Santiniketan [Abode of Peace] school, continues to function, but it is no longer an experiment, no longer innovative. It was a pioneer in its time, the culmination of a long period of persistent endeavour by Rabindranath Tagore to redeem the neglected village and bridge the

¹ This was from an address given at an informal meeting of the workers of the Sriniketan Institute of Rural Reconstruction in 1939, on Tagore's last visit to it.

gap between the city and the rural countryside. The idea of doing something to redeem the neglected village came to Tagore when he first went to live on his family's agricultural estates in East Bengal, where his father sent him as manager in the 1890s. This was his first exposure to the impoverished countryside. He was then thirty, already a famous poet, but had till then lived only in Calcutta. He wrote,

I endeavoured all the time I was in the country to get to know it down to the smallest detail. The needs of my work took me on long distances from village to village, from Shelidah to Patisar, by rivers, large and small, and across *beels* [marshes] and in this way I saw all sides of village life. I was filled with eagerness to understand the villagers' daily routine and the varied pageant of their lives. I, the town-bred, had been received into the lap of rural loveliness and I began joyfully to satisfy my curiosity. Gradually the sorrow and poverty of the villagers became clear to me, and I began to grow restless to do something about it. It seemed to me a very shameful thing that I should spend my days as a landlord, concerned only with money-making and engrossed with my own profit and loss. ('History and Ideals' 433)

His work as zamindar (landlord) was documented in the District Gazetteers of the period.² The experience played a seminal part in turning him into a humanitarian and a man of action. The closer he felt to the masses of his society, the further he moved from his own class, who were indifferent to the masses. His independent thinking gave him the courage of conviction to work alone with his ideas of 'constructive *swadeshi* [(service) of one's own country].'³ As a pragmatist, he knew there was not a lot he could do, given his meagre resources as an individual in relation to the enormity of the need. But he was determined at least to make a beginning of it. He had two objectives: to educate the villagers in self-reliance and to bring back to the villages 'life in its completeness' with 'music and readings from the epics,' as in the 'past.' He declared he would be content if that could be done realistically in only 'one or two villages.' In a speech delivered in 1928 on the seventh anniversary of Sriniketan, he wrote, 'If we could free even one village from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established Let a few villages be rebuilt in this way, and I shall say

2 O'Malley wrote, 'It must not be imagined that a powerful landlord is always oppressive and uncharitable. A striking instance is given in the Settlement Officer's account of the estate of Rabindranath Tagore. The Settlement Officer pointed out how honesty and fair dealing on the part of the estate employees had been strictly enforced, how rent remission had been generously granted to deserving cases, and how education was encouraged and a charitable dispensary run' (315).

3 The phrase *constructive swadeshi* was first used by Sumit Sarkar in *Swadeshi Movement*.

they are my India. That is the way to discover the true India' (*Towards Universal Man* 322).

Community life in the Indian villages was seen to break down for the first time with the emergence of the professional classes among the English-educated Indians. The city began to attract them away from the villages. These Indians were happy to let the government take over guardianship of the people and relinquished to it their own traditional duties to society. The result was a widening of the gap between town and country, city and village. Tagore sought to bridge the gap by bringing to the village a combination of tradition and experiment. He knew that a civilization that comprises only village life could not be sustained. *Rustic* was a synonym for the 'mind's narrowness,' he wrote (*Towards Universal Man* 304). In modern times, the city had become the repository of knowledge. It was essential therefore for the village to cooperate with the city in accessing the new knowledge. One such vital area of expertise was agriculture. His study of 'other agricultural countries' had shown that land in those countries was made to yield twice or thrice by the use of science (*Towards Universal Man* 325–27). In Sriniketan, as in his agricultural estates earlier, he endeavoured to introduce the latest techniques of Western science to improve cultivation. He hoped that would be the first step in bringing back vitality to rural Bengal. A tractor was bought for Sriniketan in 1927 because he believed that the machine must find its way to the Indian village.⁴ He wrote, 'If we can possess the science that gives power to this age, we may yet win, we may yet live' (*Towards Universal Man* 308).

Tagore wanted to organize the villages so that they could supply all their needs on a cooperative basis. He believed that, given education, the villagers could establish and maintain their own schools and granaries, banks and cooperative stores. He hoped that those ties of cooperation would bring unity to the people and free them from dependence on the city and the government. He insisted that educated Indians must unite to provide nation-building services and not look to the state. This was one of the pillars on which his dissent over *swadeshi* and *swaraj* [self-rule] was founded.⁵ That was the change he sought to bring to Indian society. By *change* he meant, first of all, a change of attitude. He wrote, 'It is not enough to try to remove wants; you can never remove them completely from outside; the far greater thing is to rouse the will of the people to remove their own wants.'⁶ The outcome he

4 Minute Book, 184, vol. 1, Sriniketan Papers, Palli Samgathana Vibhaga [Village Administration Department], Visva-Bharati, Sriniketan, Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan.

5 'Swadeshi samaj [National Society]' in *Rabindra-racanabali* (hereafter RR), 3: 526–52; 'Ingraj o Bharatbasi [Englishman and Indian]' in RR, 10: 379–403. Translations of passages are mine unless otherwise attributed. Translations of titles are by editors.

6 'Saphalatar sadupay [The Right Way to Success],' RR, 3: 570–71.

hoped would serve at least as an ideal for the whole country. It would help to build a new and alternative education at his Visva-Bharati University by combining the knowledge given in the classroom with activity and experience from outside the classroom. He wrote in a letter to Lady Abala Bose,

At present I am preoccupied with the problems of our village society. I have made up my mind to provide an example of rural reconstruction work in our own *zamindari* [agricultural estate]. A few boys from East Bengal have volunteered for the purpose. They live in the villages in the midst of the people and are trying to organize the villagers, so that they may make provision for their own education and sanitation, for the settlement of disputes etc. The workers have initiated such public works as the repair of roads and paths, excavation of tanks, cutting of drains and clearing of jungles. A deep despair now pervades rural life all over the country, so much so that high-sounding phrases like home rule, autonomy etc. appear to me almost ridiculous and I feel ashamed even to utter them. (*Chithipatra* 6: 90–91)

If we take the goal of self-reliance as a premise in Tagore's scheme of rural reconstruction, it would be easier for us to distinguish the Sriniketan endeavour from the nationalist and economic thinking of its day. The Indian National Congress was also concerned about the poverty of late-nineteenth-century rural India, but there was a difference over the remedy. The Permanent Settlement (of land tenure rights favouring zamindars) of 1793 had created a class that had the right to a share in the produce of the land even without taking part in the production. When the imperial government realized these implications, it introduced legislation to protect the tenants, but once the trend of avoiding direct cultivation was set in motion there was no going back. The tenants found it more profitable to rent out their holdings to subtenants and to go into the modern-day professions themselves, such as law and medicine. The collection of rents from every layer was so structured that a substantial portion of the produce could be reserved for those who performed no agricultural labour. The result was that the actual cultivator was left with an unpaid initial debt to the moneylender that kept accumulating. To solve this, the actual cultivator had to sell a very high quantity of his produce 'under distress.' For most peasants this cycle meant mounting landlessness (Chandra ch 9, 10; also Chaudhuri 193–94).

Tagore knew how desperate the land problem was and discussed the conditions fully in his writings. We learn about his thoughts on the subject in 'Ryoter katha [About the Peasant],' written in 1926 (RR, 24: 422–30). There he argued that the Bengal peasant could not be made into a 'peasant proprietor' as long as land was a marketable commodity. Just the reverse. The competition for land was bound to drive him out of

the market for land and leave him without enough even for his domestic needs. He warned that such a situation would inevitably lead to violence, adding that he had come across revolutionary literature of that kind in the countryside. In fact, young revolutionaries were operating alongside Tagore in the neighbourhood of Sriniketan by targeting moneylenders and their ilk. Among them were men like Sushen Mukhopadhyay, who founded a crafts centre called Amar Kutir [My Cottage] for village self-employment in 1921, while going in and out of jail. There was Pannalal Das Gupta, another revolutionary, who later founded the Tagore Society for Rural Development. Das Gupta has written about how they viewed his work in Sriniketan in those heady days. It was all too non-political for them, but they were not altogether opposed either. They were a bit suspicious of Sriniketan and observed it from a distance. In his autobiographical tract, *Bhavna chinta* [Reflective Thoughts], Pannalal Das Gupta adds that later in life all of them were convinced of Tagore's worth and swore by him. He wrote, 'For whatever reason, we thought Visva-Bharati and Sriniketan to be an altogether different effort from ours. We were wary of it, and we did not feel like joining it. Today it is another story – today we acknowledge how far-sighted Rabindranath was, even the most hardened of the Communists do' (73).

Tagore did not subscribe to the view that a change in property relations would solve the problem. He put his hope instead in human attitudes. He knew, for example, that the landlords, as a class, could not be prevented from extracting rent, but he held that the landlord could be persuaded to take 'moral' responsibility for the welfare of his tenants and protect them from the extortionists. He decided it was something that he as a landlord would do by working directly with the peasants without waiting on the nationalists or the government.

I would therefore appeal to the landlords of my country and say that they must help their tenants to become so educated, strong and healthy that they can defend themselves against tyranny from any quarter, be it the tyranny of the landlord or someone else. Otherwise, the tenants can never be guaranteed their rights through mere legislation or government favour: their weakness will always tempt whoever sees them. How can the manhood of the country be restored if the majority of our people remain easy victims for the landlord and the moneylender, the police and the revenue officer and the clerk of the law court? (*Towards Universal Man* 124)

He held firmly that the right to land should belong 'morally' to the peasant as the 'natural' tiller of the soil. He also suggested that land should be 'collectively' cultivated by cooperative methods. However, there is no evidence that he implemented collective farming, either on his family's estates or in the villages under the Sriniketan scheme of

rural reconstruction. Instead, he responded to the urgent need to work directly with the peasants, even if that meant starting with only one or two villages and liberating them from 'the shackles of ignorance and helplessness.' He was critical of the fact that the Indian National Congress had no such 'constructive' program. All they clamoured for was that their political grievances be redressed by the colonial authorities. That included a larger representation for themselves in the Council House and in the municipal government.

As early as 1910 he wrote to his son Rathindranath, who was then being groomed for the village work,

I was one of the principal organisers of the National Fund, and now I feel conscience-stricken about it. Whenever something big was planned, from the outset the country became excited with hope, but then followed, almost inevitably, the phase of disillusionment and disgrace. Now I fully realise how utterly futile are such endeavours. (*Chithipatra* 2: 14–15)

By 1910, when he wrote that letter to Rathindranath, he had come to the conclusion that working for a 'national' program was useless so long as the Indian elite were divided, so long as there was a conflict of vested interests among them. But he also knew that there was widespread sensitivity to nation-building among the general populace. His experience of the National Fund was a case in point. There he saw directly that a hefty sum had been collected in one single day despite the low incomes of the donors themselves. That is why he said in his address to the Pabna Provincial Conference of Bengal in 1908, 'The people of the land are anxious to give and to work. They want to know to whom to give and what. If we cannot direct the urges of the country along the right channels, if everything is done in a haphazard and unorganised manner, is it surprising that men should feel frustrated and dissipate their energy in fratricidal quarrels?' (*Towards Universal Man* 114).

His method was personally to identify bands of educated volunteers, who began as Swadeshi Movement activists, to dedicate themselves to living and working in the villages and enlist the cooperation of the villagers to start the work of constructing roads, schools, water reservoirs, and sanitation, and improving agricultural production – and also to create new folk music. All this was to bring a 'new objective' to their life. This work was started in his East Bengal estates in 1905. It was organized round a welfare fund and a welfare society, which took care of providing medical treatment and primary education, initiating public works such as digging wells, making and repairing roads and clearing jungles, protecting the cultivators from the ruinous effects of indebtedness, and settling all quarrels by arbitration (Rathindranath Tagore 54).

In 1906, Tagore enlisted his son Rathindranath, son-in-law Nagendranath Ganguli, and a friend's son, Santosh Chandra Majumdar as 'volunteers' of the future and sent all three of them to the University of Illinois at Urbana in the United States to study agriculture and dairy farming so that they could bring modern methods of agriculture to rural reconstruction in India.⁷ In 1912, he bought twenty *bighas* (about seven acres) of land along with a house that stood on that plot of land just outside the village called Surul, two miles west of Santiniketan. This place was afterwards named Sriniketan. The jungles surrounding the place were cleared to get a start on the reconstruction program. Meanwhile, the three 'enlisted' volunteers who were sent to Illinois had come back with their state-of-the-art agricultural training. They were asked to initiate the work at Sriniketan. Soon, however, they came down with malaria. In the second attempt, a teacher from Santiniketan was sent to stay there and get to know the villagers. But neither of those attempts could be sustained. Tagore finally chose an Englishman named Leonard Elmhirst, then a student of agriculture at Cornell University and known to be interested in voluntary work in India. Tagore had been told about Elmhirst by another Englishman, Sam Higginbotham, who was doing experimental agricultural work in India. Higginbotham was the founder of the Nainital Agricultural Institute, where Elmhirst had worked for some months in 1917–18.

Tagore met Elmhirst in 1921 in the United States. On their meeting he said to him,

I have established an educational enterprise in India which is almost wholly academic. It is situated well in the countryside of West Bengal at Santiniketan. We are surrounded by villages, Hindu, Muslim and Santal.⁸ Except that we employ a number of these village folk for various menial tasks in my school, we have no intimate contact with them at all inside their own communities. For some reason these villages appear to be in a state of steady decline. In fact they are all in decay. Some years ago I bought from the Sinha family a farm just outside the village of Surul, a little over a mile

7 Rathindranath Tagore 54; Rabindranath Tagore to Nagendranath Ganguli, 12 Kartik 1314 (29 October 1907); and 5 Falgun 1316 (14 March 1910), file: Nagendranath Ganguli, Bengali letters, Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan. Rathindranath Tagore (1888–1961), eldest son of Rabindranath Tagore, a graduate in agriculture from the University of Illinois at Urbana, first joint secretary of Visva-Bharati, gave his dedicated services to the institution. Nagendranath Ganguli (1889–1954), agricultural scientist, became professor of agriculture and rural economics of the University of Calcutta in 1921. Santosh Chandra Majumdar (1886–1926), one of the first contingent of students at the Santiniketan school, also went to the University of Illinois to study agriculture.

8 Editors' note. Santals are a 'tribal people' living in western Bengal and adjacent Bihar and Jharkhand in India, with a few in northern Bangladesh.

from my school. I hear that you might be interested in going to live and work on such a farm in order to find out more clearly the causes of this decay. (Elmhirst, *Poet and Plowman* 16)

Agricultural economist Leonard Elmhirst (1893–1974) agreed and gave leadership to Visva-Bharati's scheme of rural reconstruction from 1921 to 1923. Early in 1922, Elmhirst, with his team of two teachers and ten students from Santiniketan, took up village reconstruction work in three designated villages. Both those teachers had come to Santiniketan between 1908 and 1910 after having 'volunteered' in the Shelidaha-Kushthia work of 1905 in East Bengal. Elmhirst's diaries, including those published in his *Poet and Plowman*, are the main source of information for Sriniketan's beginnings.⁹ At first, Elmhirst thought that his 'newly gained knowledge of agricultural science from the USA would be the most useful' tool in dealing with the declining condition of the Bengal countryside. But he was soon to find that Tagore's approach of examining the villagers' problems 'as a whole' was more helpful to the work. For instance, Elmhirst and his team learnt directly that it was through offering health care that the affection of the villagers was most readily won. They taught themselves to give first aid and built up a medicine chest for the purpose. It proved difficult to get a city-educated doctor who was willing to live in the villages and serve the villagers. Therefore, Elmhirst arranged through his Quaker friends in the United States to send a paramedic-cum-nurse, Gretchen Green, to start a clinic in Sriniketan in 1922.¹⁰ Later, the Quakers also lent the services of a malaria expert, Dr Harry Timbres, who, with his wife, came from the United States for three years to set up a program of malaria-control in Sriniketan's villages.¹¹ Governmental organizations, such as the District Board and the Union Board, were already attending to the problem of eradicating malaria in the villages. While the Sriniketan team worked closely with those government bodies, they independently also approached the villagers with their own 'comprehensive' plan of rural reconstruction.

The 'comprehensive' plan of rural reconstruction was classified under the heads of 'health,' 'education,' 'economic improvement,' and 'social work.' These were implemented in the villages with the guidance of the Sriniketan centre. The Sriniketan centre was made up of a number of

9 Leonard K. Elmhirst's 'Diaries' (hereafter, 'Diaries'), 21 November 1921 to 26 July 1922, in *Poet and Plowman*; 22 June 1922 to 17 March 1924, Amar Ghosh collection; a few entries for 1924, Satyadas Chakrabarty collection. Both Ghosh and Chakrabarty were staff members of Visva-Bharati at Sriniketan.

10 Elmhirst, 'Diaries,' 2 July 1922, Ghosh collection; cf. Rabindranath Tagore to Leonard Elmhirst, 31 March 1922, English letters, file: Leonard Elmhirst, Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan. For Gretchen Green's memoirs, see her *Whole World*.

11 Elmhirst, 'Our Work' 51; also Timbres, 'Report on Medical Conditions' 368–70.

demonstration units, where economists, agriculturists, social workers, doctors, midwives, and specialists in rural industry and education worked on the problems brought to them by the villagers ('Sriniketan'). The idea was to put their heads together on different aspects of rural life. Social work, for example, consisted of holding weekly meetings with the Hindu or tribal village priest and the Muslim mullah, where readings from spiritual texts were arranged for adults, festivals were celebrated, community singing of *kirtans* and *bhajans* [devotional songs] and performing of *jatras* [rustic dramas] were organized, as well as the repairing of temples and mosques. Work in connection with 'untouchability' (denigration of persons of lowest social status) was taken up after Mahatma Gandhi's epic fast in September 1932 with Tagore presiding over the movement in the area (Uma Das Gupta 372–73).

Economic improvement was sought by setting up cooperatives and developing cottage industries. Two enterprises deserve special mention under that scheme. One was a project 'to improve the economic condition of the villages by increasing the number of weavers, organising them into a cooperative, and also by giving further training to the existing weavers' (Sriniketan Projects Book 53–61). A substantial weavers' cooperative was established between 1933 and 1935 and was the first of its kind. The other project was 'to give training in shoe-making in one selected village (to start with) and establishing a cooperative of shoe-makers with a view to improving their economic condition' (Sriniketan Projects Book 48–52). Both the projects got well under way with the long-term goal of making them self-supporting and independent of Sriniketan. Improvements in agriculture formed the other important part of the economic program. The farm, with about twenty acres of land and a large tank for irrigation, grew new vegetables and fibre crops as well as fruits. Experiments were started to increase the productivity of the main crop to relieve the poverty of the villagers, by introducing new crops in rotation along with using tractors and fertilizers for the first time.

The work done in Ballavpur was a typical sample of Sriniketan's 'comprehensive' scheme of rural reconstruction. Situated four miles from Santiniketan, the village called Ballavpur had been devastated by malaria. Work was taken up there as a single village unit in 1926, with cooperation from the villagers (Ghose). A village worker was sent from the Sriniketan centre to live in Ballavpur and work with the villagers, rather than dispensing guidance from the centre.¹² A thorough survey was at first conducted to find out about the specific needs in sanitation, medicine, vaccination, maternity work, prevention of snake-bite, education, arbitration, banking, gardening, poultry farming, weaving,

12 Hemanta Sarkar (village worker in Ballavpur, 1926), interview by Uma Das Gupta, 14 April 1978.

tanning, and social work. The Visva-Bharati Cooperative Bank, established with some of Tagore's Nobel Prize money, gave loans to the cultivators to pay off their arrears to the landlords. Sriniketan, in fact, changed the look of Ballavpur. Impressed with the results, the local zamindar of the area donated rent-free land to Sriniketan to put up a building for the Ballavpur Rural Reconstruction Society (Visva-Bharati 26–31).

Yet, with all of Tagore's will and effort, it cannot be said that the Sriniketan experiment made a substantial difference to village India. In late-nineteenth-century Indian society, peasants still adhered to their traditions without exposure to anything else, while the educated sections held them in contempt. Tagore knew from his own experience that none of those who dominated the political scene in his country felt that the villagers 'belonged.' They apprehended that recognizing this vast multitude as their own people would force them to accept responsibility for them and to begin the real work of 'constructive *swadeshi*.' They were not even interested enough to try. That was where the Sriniketan effort was most valuable to Tagore. He saw that at the very least it built a relationship with the village. That meant more to him than the measure of success or failure over agricultural productivity or health care. He wrote, 'The valuable gift of sympathy in some of our humble workers has worked a miracle which must not be contemptuously mentioned because it has not been measured and not accurately recorded.'¹³

He hated the contempt of the Bengali intelligentsia for the country folk. To them, a large part of their countrymen were *chotolok*, literally 'small people.' With extreme sarcasm he wrote, 'To us how can they be anything but *chotolok* given that we have no feelings for them?' ('Palli seva' 64). He ridiculed the Bengali college students who studied economics and ethnology with their European teachers in order to learn of the customs and laws of the village next door. He wrote sadly, 'There have been many a movement among our common people, but that remains unknown to our students. They do not want to know because it does not fetch them pass marks in examinations' ('Palli seva' 65, 69). As he elaborated in a letter to Elmhirst,

It is well known that the education prevalent in our country is extremely meagre in the spread of its area and barren in its quality. Unfortunately this is all that is available to us and the artificial standard set up is proudly considered as respectable. Outside the *bhadralok* [gentleman] class, pathetic in its struggle to affix university labels to the names of its members, there is a vast obscure multitude who cannot even dream of such a costly ambition.¹⁴

13 Tagore to Elmhirst, 3 September 1932, English letters, file: Leonard Elmhirst, Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan.

14 Tagore to Elmhirst, 19 December 1937, English letters, file: Leonard Elmhirst, Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Santiniketan.

It can, however, be said that for a brief period Sriniketan blossomed into an inspiring environment, with idealists from everywhere joining hands with Indian villagers in bringing hope and action to their lives – just what the founder of Visva-Bharati worked for. However pioneering it may have been, the Sriniketan effort was not directed towards revolutionary change or anything like it in the economic and social structure of the country. The changes sought were to be evolutionary, or gradual, coming from within society, to be brought about by a change of heart. In Tagore's world view, no change was enduring that did not follow from a change in human psychology. He wrote, 'Any teaching concerning man must have human nature for its chief element. How far it will harmonize with human nature is a matter of time' (*Letters from Russia* 117). For this he appealed for help to all. He once told a group of writers visiting Sriniketan,

It is not the work of one, it must involve many . . . it is hard to imagine a life as cheerless as in our rural areas . . . If you cannot do anything else, at least cut yourself off from newspapers and take yourself to any village and give education to them with whom nobody has ever spoken; bring them happiness, hope, serve them, and let them know that there is a dignity in them as human beings, that they do not deserve the contempt of the universe ('Byadhi o protikar [Sickness and Its Remedy],' *RR*, 10: 632).

That was in 1938, close to the end of his life. He was still expressing the angst of those early years when he first experienced the countryside of East Bengal. Tagore did not live to see India's freedom from imperial rule. I do believe that was not one of his regrets. His regret was that the villages had hardly changed. His regret was that imperial rule had created an Indian elite who were indifferent to the need for social justice.

Despite acknowledging the disappointments, not all is lost today. Sriniketan remains an important model for mobilizing villages non-politically. In and around Santiniketan-Sriniketan today there is Pannalal Das Gupta's Tagore Society for Rural Development.¹⁵ Founded in 1969–70 as a registered society, it specializes in motivating villagers to take on environmental self-help projects. Another such non-governmental private initiative for rural development was formed in 1984, calling itself the Elmhirst Institute of Community Studies, the members of which are working mainly in the areas of women and child development, including family counselling, family adoption, de-addiction and rehabilitation, and HIV/AIDS education and intervention. In other parts of India, leaders were drawn to the idea of building

15 Tagore Society for Rural Development, *Pamphlet and Project Reports; Project History, Bolpur, 1969–1980*; and *Project History, Rajnagar-Khairasol, 1994–2000*.

village self-reliance and have devoted their lives to the cause in post-independence India. Mahatma Gandhi's follower Baba Amte in Madhya Pradesh was one such key personality. More recently, the utopian commune Timbaktu Collective in rural Andhra Pradesh, led by a husband-and-wife team, Bablu and Mary Ganguly, have organized the farm labourers of Anantapur district to work for the regeneration of wasteland and start organic farming, soil conservation, and propagation of traditional food crops. They have also taken steps towards women's and Dalits' [Oppressed] empowerment as well as the improvement of rural health. Most of these ideas were born and nurtured in the pioneering laboratory of Sriniketan. Interestingly, recent endeavours have not always been aware of Sriniketan's experiments. Bablu Ganguly acknowledges Fukuoka as his mentor, not Tagore.¹⁶ Though Bengali by birth, he may be aware of Tagore only as poet and song-writer. It is not surprising, since today Tagore's Sriniketan is only a place-name to most. It is no longer innovative. Only history will relate its true story.

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16 Masanobu Fukuoka (b. 1913), is a pioneer of no-till farming system, which is referred to as 'natural farming' or the Fukuoka Method. He was the recipient of the Deshikottam [honorary doctorate] awarded in 1988 by Visva-Bharati. See 'No-Till Farming,' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No-till_farming; and 'Masanobu Fukuoka,' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masanobu_Fukuoka.

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