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Source: *The Public Historian*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (May 2013), pp. 99-103

Published by: University of California Press on behalf of the National Council on Public History

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/tph.2013.35.2.99>

Accessed: 28-09-2016 06:30 UTC

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Review Essays

Santiniketan: The Making of a New Indian Pilgrimage

INDIRA CHOWDHURY

Pilgrimage routes in India are speckled with ancient temple-towns and sites of legendary and, sometimes, miraculous events. The journey of the pilgrim is always through a sacred geography which at the same time is an intense and inward one—as much physical as spiritual. Post-independence India has witnessed the phenomenon of new pilgrimage sites to which visitors are drawn—Mahatma Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, Birla House where Gandhi was assassinated, and Santiniketan where Rabindranath Tagore, poet extraordinaire and educator set up his school in 1901—all examples of new pilgrimage sites. These sites attract visitors who, unlike ordinary tourists, visit with a sense of reverence, and unlike the traditional pilgrimage sites, which are usually associated with rituals related to births and deaths, the new pilgrimage sites have no relationship to individual life-cycle rituals. Apart from that, Santiniketan, which is the site under review here, places the new pilgrim in a strange position—disallowing the possibility of any introspection or inward journey. This review will demonstrate how understanding the role of interpretation and experience of such sites can open up new questions for the public historian.

Located 180 kilometers [112 miles] away from Kolkata (formerly, Calcutta), Santiniketan has a unique history. Bhubandanga, literally “the grounds of Bhuban Sinha,” as the place was then called after its owner, was “discovered” accidentally by Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's father, in the

The Public Historian, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 99–103 (May 2013).

ISSN: 0272-3433, electronic ISSN 1533-8576.

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Udayan, one of the houses in the Uttarayan Complex where Tagore lived was conceived by the poet's son Rathindranath. (Photograph by Shambhu Saha, 1939. Photo No. SS 401 Rabindra Bhavana Photo Archives.)

early 1860s. Enchanted by the stark landscape where the eye had an unimpeded view of the western skies at sunset, Debendranath went on to purchase the land. He built a house called “Santiniketan,” literally “abode of peace,” which stands even today. The area itself was renamed Santiniketan as he found the place conducive to meditation.¹ It was here that the Maharshi's youngest son, Rabindranath, started his experimental school in 1901 and it was here that he received news of being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. It is also where he started his university, Visva-Bharati in 1921. And it was from the museum in the Uttarayan complex here that Tagore's Nobel medallion was stolen in 2004 and subsequently replaced by the Swedish Academy. There are many narratives that can be woven around Santiniketan.

The Uttarayan complex at Santiniketan has several houses in distinctive architectural styles. Tagore lived in each one of them from 1919 onwards. Uttarayan now houses a small museum and Tagore's archives. The museum was redesigned in 2011 for the sesquicentennial of Tagore's birth. It tells the story of Tagore's life through photographs and text. The space is stacked with photographs and memorabilia which visitors have to crowd around to get a proper glimpse of. There has been very little attention paid to elements of design, specifically to user movement within the museum itself, and visitors

1. Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (New Delhi: UBSPD, 2008), 40.



Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan. Gandhi visited Santiniketan for the first time in 1915. He met Tagore for the last time when he visited with Kasturba Gandhi in 1940. (Photo No.1670A Rabindra Bhavana Photo Archives.)

are not encouraged to linger over exhibits or to reflect on the implications of the material on display. What kind of relationship did Tagore wish to nurture with the world? After all, the motto he had adopted for his international university when translated from Sanskrit reads: “Where the whole world meets in a single nest.” What kind of conversations did Tagore have with the world—with Einstein, for example, whom he met in Berlin in 1930? Although the exhibition includes a photograph of this meeting, it does not draw us to the philosophical and meditative dialogue that happened at Einstein’s house in Caputh. The replacement Nobel medal is displayed without reference to the stolen original. Nor does the museum explore new technologies to make available to its audiences Tagore’s voice or performances. The conceptualization of the Museum seems caught in a time warp—resembling a nineteenth-century museum rather than a twenty-first century one.

One wanders out of the museum to visit the houses in which Tagore stayed. Konark, Shyamali, Punaschha, Udayan, and Udichi are the five houses built by Tagore from 1918 onwards. Although some photographs are displayed inside a few of the houses, these houses are not house museums. There is no attempt made to recount the experiences of those who lived here with Tagore from 1919 to the 1960s. Such narratives could transform the experience of the visitors, offering glimpses into a transitional period in Indian history. The unique clay and tar house named Shyamali, built in 1934, has

murals done by the students of Kala Bhavana (the Fine Arts Department of the University). Mahatma Gandhi stayed here during his visit to Santiniketan in 1940, and later in 1945. Visitors are not allowed to enter Shyamali. Udayan—the house Tagore occupied towards the end of his life—can be viewed only from the verandah. Visitors can only have a glimpse of the drawing room where he received visitors. The influence of Tagore's travels on his experimentation with architectural forms and furniture design are not commented on by the Rabindra Bhavan Museum authorities. Visitors are not told this little revealing snippet about the clay house, Shyamali, that it was to be a "low-cost structure and would serve as a model house for villagers . . . One of the rooms was constructed by using earthen water-pots arranged inside plaster-casings to form its roof and walls. According to Rabindranath, this would keep the rooms cool as the hot air having to pass through these earthen pots would lose some of its heat."²

Visitors are, therefore, not enabled to see the larger dimensions of Tagore's thinking that shaped the very spaces within which they find themselves. The signage is minimal and very little historical exposition is offered. The lack of curatorial engagement with the space perhaps demonstrates a lack of interest on the part of the authorities that takes for granted Tagore's status. Such thinking assumes that those who visit have read enough Tagore, an assumption that may not be unfounded. Indeed, in Bengal, Tagore is widely read and still revered. The new pilgrim who comes to Santiniketan thus arrives with his or her own understanding of Tagore and with a deep sense of reverence. But the irony of leaving the area free from curatorial intervention is that the visitor leaves without gathering any new insights into the way of life Tagore attempted to nurture at Santiniketan. There are no guided tours, docent walks or *son et lumiere* shows. Nor is the discerning reader reminded of the poems he wrote, the debates he had with his peers while living here. There is a vast body of writing by Tagore himself and by other writers who lived in or visited Santiniketan, which could be drawn on to create stimulating narratives about the Santiniketan of Tagore's time that could take such museums beyond the conventional ways in which house museums are presented. During my recent visit to the site in November 2012, I was struck by the lack of imagination that prevailed in this official representation of Tagore—which tells his life story through events in a dry and dispassionate manner. I asked myself if there were ways in which the place preserved something of Tagore's spirit: the experimentation and passion with which he and those who worked with him wrote and taught?

One did not have to wander far for an answer. A short distance away from the Uttarayan complex is the Kala Bhavana where students of fine arts work on their sculptures and their murals. The vibrant energy of the place is striking.

2. UNESCO World Heritage sites <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5495/>, accessed on 10 January 2012. A detailed description is available in Bengali in Sumitendranath Thakur, *Shantiniketer Chena Achena* (Kolkata: Mitra O Ghosh, 2003), pp. 47-50.



K.G. Subramanyan's mural on the Art History Department completed in 2012. Designed by Suren Kar who was the resident architect at Santiniketan, this building used to be the studio of the artist Nandalal Bose. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

The presence of a larger than life statue of Gandhi, and large cement and laterite pebble sculptures titled *Mill Call* and *Santhal Family* by the sculptor Ramkinkar Baij, bear witness to the experimentation that happened there. Around the time I visited, the legendary artist K.G. Subramanyan had just completed painting an entire building along with his artist-students. This building used to be the studio of the artist Nandalal Bose who was instrumental in starting Kala Bhavana. (See cover image.) Subramanyan's earlier mural in black and white covered the entire building of the Painting Department. Visitors to Santiniketan also wander around Kala Bhavana where they are witness to the numerous experiments by artists. Although the new pilgrim may be left unaffected by the Uttarayan complex because of the lack of an interpretative layer, it is at Kala Bhavana that the new pilgrim is offered a direct experience of Tagore's transformational vision that might provoke introspection. This vision that created Santiniketan lives on within the artistic practices adopted by its artist community.

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