

Santiniketan & Visva-Bharati: A Brief History

Santiniketan

More than one and a half centuries ago in the arid expanse of Bolpur Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's father, took on the permanent lease twenty bighas of land from the landlord of Raipur in 1863. He built a house there and named it '**Santiniketan**' – an abode of peace. Gradually the place came to be known as *Santiniketan*.

On 8 March 1888 Devendranath made a trust deed dedicating the *Santiniketan ashrama* to the devotees of the Supreme Being for meditation. However, idol worship of any kind was forbidden inside the premises of the *ashrama*. The deed also mentions about organising a fair and founding a school.

The **Upasana Mandir**, a prayer hall made of iron structure with coloured glass was built in 1891. On the fifth anniversary of the inauguration of '**Mandir**' a fair was organised in 1895 which later became famous as '**Pous Mela**'.

Brahmacharyashrama

At the beginning of the twentieth century Rabindranath Tagore, the great poet, founded a school in the idyllic retreat of *Santiniketan*, modelled on *tapovana*, the hermitage of ancient India. Gurudev started his school, **Brahmacharyashrama**, with only five students in 1901. The school was later renamed as **Patha-Bhavan** in 1925.

As an apology for founding a school in *Santiniketan* he says in 'A Poet's School', "*I suppose this individual poet's answer would be, when he brought together a few boys, one sunny day in winter, among the warm shadows of the sal trees, strong, straight and tall, with branches of a dignified moderation, he started to write a poem in a medium not of words.*"

He further writes, "*I tried my best to develop in the children of my school the freshness of their feeling for Nature, a sensitiveness of soul in their relationship with their human surroundings, with the help of literature, festive ceremonials and also religious teaching which enjoins us to come to the nearer presence of the world through the soul... Among other subjects learnt in the open air under the shade of the trees they had their music and picture-making, they had their dramatic performances, activities that were the expressions of life.*"

Rabindranath went to visit Europe in 1912. He was awarded the **Nobel Prize in Literature** in 1913 for '**Gitanjali, Song Offerings**'.

Visva-Bharati

At this time, Rabindranath realised that India has a lot to contribute to the world. He wrote in a letter to his son Rathindranath in 1916, "*The Santiniketan school must be the thread linking India with the world.*"

This realisation led to the foundation of *Visva-Bharati* in 1918. The motto of *Visva-Bharati* is '*yatraviswambhabatyekanidam*', 'where the world meets in a nest'. *Visva-Bharati*, he wrote, "*was India's but it must be made into a centre for the spiritual endeavour of all mankind.*"

Visva-Bharati was formally inaugurated in December 1921. Tagore wrote in 1921, "*I have taken courage to invite Europe to our institution. There will be meeting of truths here.*" Teachers like Sylvain Levi and others from different parts of the world came to teach at *Visva-Bharati*.

Tagore wrote in the context of *Visva-Bharati*, "*Creation of knowledge is the principal task of a university, dissemination of that knowledge is its secondary task.*" **Vidya-Bhavana** was a centre for post-graduate studies and research. Among the subjects taught were Vedic and classical Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Persian, Arabic, German, Latin, Hindu philosophy, Islami culture, Bengali literature, Hindusthani literature etc.

Siksha-Bhavana was then an institute of intermediate and undergraduate studies.

From the very inception, music, painting and craft were important parts of education in the school at *Santiniketan*. Rabindranath wrote, “*The teaching of Indian music and art would be the two important limbs of Visva-Bharati when it is established.*”

Initially, music and painting were taught at **Kala-Bhavana**. A separate institute for music, **Sangit-Bhavana**, was established in 1933. *Rabindra Sangit*, Hindusthani classical music, Manipuri and south Indian dances and instruments like *israj*, *sitar* and *tabla* were taught at Sangit-Bhavana. The subjects taught at *Kala-Bhavana* were painting, sculpture, wood-carving, lithography, *alapana*, batik, leather-work etc.

Cheena-Bhavana, Department of Sino-Indian Studies, was established in 1937 with assistance from the Government of China. The courses in *Cheena-Bhavana* included Chinese language, literature, philosophy, history and culture.

Hindi-Bhavana, Department of Hindi Studies, was established in 1938.

Sriniketan

Tagore wrote in 1919, “*If ever a truly Indian school is established it must from very beginning implement its acquired knowledge of economics, of agriculture, of health and all other everyday sciences in the surrounding villages. ... This school must practise agriculture, dairy-keeping and weaving on the best modern methods. ... I have proposed to call this ideal school Visva-Bharati.*”

This very idea led to the foundation of **Sriniketan** at *Surul* in 1922. Way back in 1906 Tagore had sent his son Rathindranath Tagore, along with Santoshchandra Majumdar and Nagendranath Ganguli to America to study agriculture and dairy-keeping. He had also bought *Surul Kuthibari* in 1912. Under the able leadership of Leonard Elmhirst Rathindranath Tagore, Santoshchandra Majumder, Kalimohan Ghosh and Gourgopal Ghosh actively joined in the work of rural reconstruction at *Sriniketan* in 1922. The **Institute of Rural Reconstruction** was established in 1923. An important part of Sriniketan education was teaching of handicrafts. Handicrafts, like leather work, weaving, pottery, book-binding etc. were taught at **Silpa Bhavana** (1922).

Tagore founded another school called **Siksha-Satra** for village boys in 1924. The school was initially started at *Santiniketan* and was later shifted to *Sriniketan* in 1927. Talking about Siksha-Satra in ‘A Poet’s School’ Tagore writes, “*... we started our work with a few boys, who either were orphans or whose parents were too destitute to be able to send them to any school whatever. ... Before long we discovered that minds actively engaged in a round of constructive work fast developed energies which sought eager outlets in the pursuit of knowledge, ... For these boys’ vacation has no meaning. Their studies, though strenuous, are not a task, being permeated by a holiday spirit which takes shape in activities in their kitchen, their vegetable garden, their weaving, their work of small repairs. It is because their class-work has not been wrenched away and walled-in from their normal vocation, because it has been made a part of their daily current of life, that it easily carries itself by its own onward flow.*”

Loka -Siksha Samsad was established in 1936 for those who could not attend schools and colleges. Visva-Bharati published a series of books in Bengali called **Loka-Siksha Granthamala** in this connection.

Siksha-charcha Bhavana was established in 1937 for training village school teachers.

Visva-Bharati after 1941

Before his death, Tagore makes a fervent appeal to Mahatma Gandhi in a letter in 1940, “*Accept this institution under your protection, giving it an assurance of permanence if you consider it to be a national asset. Visva-Bharati is like a vessel which is carrying the cargo of my life’s best treasure, and I hope it may claim special care from my countrymen for its preservation.*”

After Gandhijee's death, the Government of India, by a parliamentary act, made *Visva-Bharati* '**an institute of national importance**'.

Several changes have been made and new *bhavanas* were added to *Visva-Bharati* after the poet's death.

Rabindra-Bhavana, a repository of Tagore's paintings, manuscripts and books was established in 1941.

Vinay-Bhavana, a teacher's training college was established in 1948.

In 1951 ***Palli Samgathana Vibhaga***, Department of Rural Reconstruction, was established in Sriniketan merging the Institute of Rural Reconstruction and Silpa Sadana.

Palli-Siksha Sadana(now ***Palli Siksha Bhavana***) a college of agriculture was instituted in 1963.

In 1972 ***Vidya-Bhavana*** became the Institute of Humanities and ***Siksha-Bhavana*** became the Institute of Science.

Nippon Bhavana, a department of Japanese Studies was established in ? .

Bhasha-Bhavana, an Institute of language, Literature and Culture, was set up in ? in a bid to promote interaction among various language departments.

Bangladesh Bhavana was set up with the help of the Government of Bangladesh for literary and cultural studies of Bangladesh in 2018.

Santiniketan became a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** in 2023.