

## The Architectural Style of Shantiniketan

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### Abstract

*In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Tagore's of Jorasanko tried to create India's own identity in many fields. Their contributions to the field of literature, art, aesthetics and architecture are relevant aspects of our common cultural past. Much before Santiniketan shot into prominence as a cultural arena, the family of Gaganendranath and Abanindranath Tagore, also being pioneers of the neo Bengal art movement, and Samarendranath Tagore initiated the process of intercultural fusion and assimilation of ideas at their Jorasanko house. Santiniketan is a unique example of a beautiful blend of various cultural influences, and this blend gives Santiniketan a character of its own that makes it stand out aesthetically and philosophically. It is very important that we return to appreciating it and studying for its purely aesthetic qualities and also as a model of architecture that is in a constant dialogical relationship with nature and ecology, where the man made constructions stand one with nature and not as an intrusion into it.*

**Keywords:** Shantiniketan, Sriniketan, Rabindranath Tagore, Jorasanko, architecture

### Introduction

The contribution of the in Tagore family in the fields of literature, arts aesthetics and architecture is still relevant and need to be studied again in every aspect of the idea of the present green movement and globalization. In this regard Rabindranath's experiment in education, art and architecture at his Santiniketan School is particularly revealing and interesting. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Tagore's of Jorasanko tried to create India's own identity in many fields. Their contributions to the field of literature, art, aesthetics and architecture are relevant aspects of our common cultural past. Much before Santiniketan shot into prominence as a cultural arena, the family of Gaganendranath and Abanindranath Tagore, also being pioneers of the neo Bengal art movement, and Samarendranath Tagore initiated the process of intercultural fusion and assimilation of ideas at their Jorasanko house.

### *The Growth of Santiniketan*

Rabindranath's home in Santiniketan did not remain so isolated. It went on to become quite an establishment that the world turns up to see even today. But its growth happened more by chance than by design. Santiniketan, popularly known today as a university town, a hundred miles to the north of Kolkata, was originally an ashram built by Debendranath Tagore, where anyone, irrespective of caste and creed, could come and spend time meditating on the one Supreme God. Debendranath, who was father of the poet, Rabindranath, was a leading figure of the Indian Renaissance.

In a trust deed prepared in 1888, he declared: 'Apart from worshipping the Formless, no community may worship any idol depicting god, man, or animals; neither may anyone arrange sacrificial fires or rituals in Santiniketan.... No insult to any religion or religious deity will be allowed here. The sermons given here will be such that will be appropriate to the worship of the Creator and Father and will help in ethics, benevolence and brotherhood ,..' Maharshi Debendranath had a spiritual realisation while meditating under a glade of Chhatim trees (*alstonia scholaris*). These trees still stand with a plaque that says: 'He is the repose of my life, the joy of my heart, the peace of my soul.' Chhatimtala, as the sacred place came to be called, is the spot that symbolises the starting point of Santiniketan. Maharshi Debendranath had also initially built the prayer hall - all glass and God - intoxicated -shimmering in sunlight, along with a no-nonsense residence in that stark Birbhum landscape. As a township, the Visva Bharati University happened much, much later and its architectural structure was shaped by the likes of Abanindranath Tagore, the poet's nephew; Nandalal Bose, the artist; and Suren Kar who despite not being a trained architect dedicated his career to architecture and interior design that stretched beyond Santiniketan to some of the Sarabhai homes in Ahmedabad.

### ***The Architecture of Santiniketan***

During Tagore's time Santiniketan could not afford the services of a trained architect, thus artist Surendranath Kar stepped in to fill this place. Before the advent of Kar, Santiniketan architecture was devoid of any direct flavor of Indianess. He designed buildings which were adorned with an open veranda in front and a rear courtyard in accordance with traditional Bangla-type thatched cottages which allowed space and air.. Many a times the front courtyard would be surrounded by a low parapet like structure that could be used to sit on. Such an arrangement could have been a probable influence of eastern temple architecture or mughal courtyards. He also designed small integrated quarters for the Visva-Bharati teachers, many of them were clustered in a shape of an 'U' to enhance the interaction between occupants and inculcate the feeling of a greater family.

During 1918-19, with the coming in of Nandalal Bose, Santiniketan architecture gathered a distinct and an unique character of its own. This was an eclectic mixture which was immensely influenced by the ancient Brahmanical and Buddhist temples and viharas, like in Ajanta or Ellora caves, and also design influences from far east with reference to the interior design of the buildings and the use of wood work. Not only this, Santiniketan architecture also derives much from Mughal and Sultanate architecture as well as local rural architecture.

In 1928, Surendranath Kar supervised the building of Simhasadana. Its architecture bears the influence of Atala mosque of Jaunpur, with a domineering façade and an arched gateway. The building also has two ornamental gateways, with toranas that provide a unique symmetrical stability to the central building.

The geographical centre of the Ashram has a central open space called Gaur Prangana, very essential to Tagore's philosophy. There are few buildings near the Gaur Prangana and one of them is the old Library Building, which has an open south facing veranda, profusely decorated with frescos in Jaipur style by Nandalal Bose and his students. Kar's architecture adapted a number of elements directly from the present local nature, and we can see this in the way he utilized various floral patterns as architectural designs with ease, giving the structures interesting aesthetic qualities. In his architectural design he combined a sound and pleasing design within a mould of utility.

The black house shows a striking assimilation of cross cultural ideas with local building material. Its external walls are profusely decorated with bas-reliefs from Bahrut, Mahabalipuram, Egyptian and Assyrian motifs by Ramkinar Baij and Prabhas Sen, and many others. Rabindranath never quite liked to live in the same house for long and thus for this reason the Uttarayana compound comprises five separate residences of Tagore namely, Udayan, Konarka, Shyamali, Punascha and Udichi, along with a rose garden and an artificial pond with a built up island with weeping willows. Keeping in mind the unhindered horizon line of Santiniketan landscape, the Uttarayana grew up gradually on a horizontal plane- in tune with the subtle wave like undulations of the Khoai around. Udayan, the largest house in the Uttarayana cluster was built gradually over a period of nine years from 1919 onwards till 1929. The interior of Udayan is a fine blend of far eastern and Buddhist caves in spirit. While the many pillars that support the veranda are styled as a fusion of ancient Indian cave monastery pillars and various style of Jharokhas found in some old havelis at Gujarat, with the main room on the ground floor having a wooden ceiling and interior pillars that speak of influence from caves of Ajanta, Bagh and Ellora, the use of timber paneling and internal wooden pillars is essentially Japanese in flavor. The set of wooden railings in front and back on the ground floor has hints of Angkor Vat to some extent.

Konark is unique in a way that the floors and the roofs are not on one uniform plane here. There are 14 planes on the roof at the top, and this gives the feeling of establishing a contact with nature from all possible angles. In 1934 Nandalal Bose constructed an unique Chaitya style construction used to display artworks, Rabindranath was so impressed with this Chaitya that he put forward a wish to have a similar mud hut built for his residence. That come into being as Shyamali. Shyamali has a number of bas reliefs by Nandalal Bose and Ramkinar Baij, and the certain frontality that we find in Shyamali essentially speaks of the influence of ancient Buddhist cave architecture.

### ***Pallis***

The various 'pallis' or clusters of homes, designed mainly as staff quarters in Santiniketan, reflect a primary sense of township that followed a common architectural grammar. However, some of the individual buildings have about them a discreet eccentricity that is quite their own. Many of the public spaces blur into the surrounding vacant land among the buildings and lend a sense of expanse to the housing clusters. This use of space also includes carefully planned flora and fauna that seamlessly blend into the landscape. The oeuvre of Tagore's architectural philosophy is often full of inconsistencies, yet there is a kind of coherence in those contradictions.

### ***Campus***

The campus has about it a sense of minimalism in keeping with Tagore's concept of an ashram or hermitage, which is how he described his school. Nature thus plays a huge role in keeping balance with elementary brick and mortar. The glass temple, for example, seamlessly leads into a sheltered space without experiencing any obstacle or limitation invoked by closed walls. However, most of the staff quarters are more practical and functional, without losing out on Tagore's essential sense of aesthetics and unity. Vernacular architecture, mainly tribal in origin, blends with Tagore's highly stylized domain of the visual arts. According to Dr Sisir Kurnar Das, the typical Tagorean logical construct is essentially circular in nature, dwelling on a series of nesting symbols and metaphors where he drifts from one allegory to another like the twittering and tweeting bird hopping from one branch to another, As Jatin says in Tagore's play, Grihapravesha, 'A piece of architecture is not just brick and mortar, there has to be nectar in it.' It is this elusive search for 'nectar' that becomes the philosophical core of several Santiniketan buildings constructed during the poet's lifetime. Tagore's unambiguous take on the mutual indentation and intervention of the 'home and the world' necessitated an architectural design where his own residence, Uttarayan, became a shining example of an appendage to or extension of the world, without crossing the barriers or breaching the boundary walls separating the two inseparables. The family home still remains a fine example of Suren Kar's signature that blends seamlessly with ancient Mauryan - mainly Buddhist - architecture with serrated columns that hold the walls together. Also, the varied heights of UK tool within in the same building gave Uttarayan its unique Rajasthani flavour.

### ***Architectural Design***

The architectural design was based on the basic philosophy that a building could essentially be reduced to an arch or tunnel, where the rooms are placed on the wings. The designing always commenced with the central lounge around which the other rooms grew organically. The elevations of the buildings are never monumental, the floor and the plinth always being close to the ground level.

There were several other deciding factors that played their roles in shaping the final architecture of Santiniketan. The compulsions caused by the perpetual cash-crunch led to the maximum utilisation of space. The inspirational impetus offered by the local architectural styles commonly visible in the surrounding villages helped in the use of indigenous building material. The punishing, tropical climate of Birbhum led to the use of fins, overhangs and lighter colours of the exterior to protect the walls and keep the interiors cool. And, of course, there was the obvious pressure of creating something very Indian in the face of the audacious imperialism embedded in the architecture of Lutyens, Delhi. What Suren Kar's architecture tried to achieve in Santiniketan was to neutralise the basic dichotomy of man's private and public life with an ethnic concept. Thus, the buildings that were constructed around the ashram during the 1940s and 1950s are mostly replicas of the smaller buildings in the Uttarayan complex, either of Punashcha, or of Konark yet Tagore broke away from the norm to build for himself the mud hut Shyamali that defied all the previous architectural norms, laughing like a singing brook that chooses its own course despite the dictates of the main river. During the poet's lifetime, perhaps it was his basic restless nature that led him to construct the individual resting places inside the privacy of the Uttarayan complex.

Within the Ashram campus some important buildings were Patha-Bhavana, with beautiful frescoes by Nandalai Bose and his students; Natun-Bari, built in 1902 by the poet for his family; Dehali, built in 1904 where Rabindranath lived for a while; Singha-Sadan, built out of a donation by Satyendraprasanna Sinha of Raipur. It has a clock tower and bell that regulates the timings of daily routine for the ashram inmates. It was in this building that Oxford University conferred its honorary doctorate on Rabindranath Tagore.

Dinantika, built in 1939, is an octagonal structure originally used as a tea-house. Staff members of Visva Bharati would meet here in the evening for a cup of tea and relaxation. Taladhwa, a round mud hut with a thatched roof built around a toddy palm with part of its trunk and its huge palm leaves stretching out over the top, was built for Tejeschandra Sen, a tree-lover. Ratan Kuthi was erected in 1924 out of a donation by Trustees of Sir Ratan Tata to be used as a residence for scholars who stayed and worked at Santiniketan. Malancha, built in 1926 by Rabindranath, was meant for his youngest daughter, Mira.

Rabindranath's Santiniketan, established in 1901, was a multifaceted vision that aimed at unity of humanity in different cultures around the world. Visva Bharati was a place where 'the world would form a single nest' using a combination of various elements including education of children in a nature-loving environment, use of music and arts for emotional development, social work to help neighbouring villages, promotion of rural development through Sriniketan and research on philosophy, fine arts, literature and culture. The architecture of Santiniketan masterminded by Suren Kar was meant to aid Tagore's universal philosophy of peace and brotherhood.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion we can say that in India, the Santiniketan style of architecture brought back a sense of Indianess, deriving from a vast history of design and architecture in India. This was in an era where many welcomed and followed the cultural hegemony of the west. The study of Santiniketan architecture is important to the understanding of Tagore's philosophy, it is a little window into the mind of the great and many faceted artist that Tagore was. It is important to return to the study of Santiniketan architecture and to appreciate it to reflect upon the intricacies of the man- environment relationship, especially in modern times when our ecology has been badly destroyed by man. Santiniketan architecture is an eclectic fusion of art and design influenced from multiple lands ranging from countries far away like Japan to local Bangla type traditional households, and multiple time periods in Indian history, from ancient Buddhist and Brahmanical caves of Ajanta and Ellora to the Sultanate and Mughal architecture. It is a unique example of a beautiful blend of various cultural influences, and this blend gives Santiniketan a character of its own that makes it stand out aesthetically and philosophically. It is very important that we return to appreciating it and studying for its purely aesthetic qualities and also as a model of architecture that is in a constant dialogical relationship with nature and ecology, where the man made constructions stand one with nature and not as an intrusion into it.

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