

# A Poet's Ashram

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Rabindranath Tagore's Experimental  
Community in Colonial India

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## Introduction

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# Introduction

The ideal of the *ashram* is sinking deeper and deeper into our nature every day.  
Rabindranath Tagore, 'My School', 1917

In 1901 the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) established a school in a quiet and solitary place in western Bengal. That place had come to be known as Santiniketan (the abode of peace). In ancient literary representations of ashrams and *tapovanas* (forest hermitages), Rabindranath found a model for his school.<sup>1</sup> He named his school Brahmacharyashram – an ashram dedicated to the pedagogic and spiritual concept of *brahmacharya*. What he wished to revive was the ancient Indian practice of acquiring education under the tutelage of a *guru* (teacher) at his residence in an ashram. During the next four decades, the idea of the ashram remained central to the ways in which he sought to conceptualize his institutions. Towards the end of the second decade of the century, Visva-Bharati, his international university, was founded. In 1922 an Institute of Rural Reconstruction was added to the university. The word 'ashram' and the ideas it evoked continued to be an important part of the cultural identity of the poet's institutions and the community they constituted.

Traditionally, an ashram is a space where a group of people practice a spiritual way of life. For the poet, the ashrams and the *tapovanas* of India's ancient past represented an ideal way of life shared by teachers and pupils. Curiously, his role as the founder of an ashram community has yet to receive scholarly attention. After all, Rabindranath cannot be easily classed as one of the spiritual *gurus* whose domain is the ashram. He is remembered chiefly as a literary genius and as an ideologue who helped crystallize a conception of a pluralistic Indian civilization. Why did Rabindranath Tagore wish to revive the institution of the ashram? Did he reinvent that age-old ideal? How did his conception of his ashram evolve? These are some of the questions that prompted the writing of this book.

In his essay 'My School' (1917), Rabindranath writes that his educational 'work' has 'found its soul in the spirit of the *ashram*' where it is located and that the school is only 'its outer form'.<sup>2</sup> The distinction made by Rabindranath between the ashram and the school, the ideological 'soul' of his institution and its outward pedagogic function, is significant. Through

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his ashram, Rabindranath conceptualized not only a system of education but also a way of living and a community. That idea grew out of his critique of certain aspects of colonial modernity and modern Western culture: the materialism of urban existence, the relations of power prevalent in colonial India and, most crucially, the dominant discourses of nationalism. Through his ashram, he attempted to imagine and build an alternative community; a community that was meant to be firmly grounded in India's cultural inheritance.

This book is not a 'history' of the educational institutions Rabindranath founded, nor is it a survey of his educational thought. It is an attempt to recover and historicize his idea of his ashram community. It focuses on how he articulated this ideal through his writings and how he attempted to translate it into praxis. Nevertheless, it does not exclude other voices. The effort to imagine and build this experimental ashram community was a collective effort in which many extraordinary individuals participated. This book repeatedly evokes the memories and thoughts voiced by several of these participants.

### I

#### *The Ashram as an Experimental Community*

What does the term 'ashram' signify in the context of Rabindranath's educational institutions? To answer this question, we must revisit the prehistory of Santiniketan. In 1863 Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), Rabindranath's father and a leader of the religious reformist group known as Brahmo Samaj, bought a few acres of land at a secluded and lonely place in rural Bengal. In the essay 'My School', Rabindranath evokes that originary moment – the moment that saw the genesis of Santiniketan: 'My father ... selected this lonely spot as the one suitable for his life of communion with God. This place ... he dedicated to the use of those who seek peace and seclusion for their meditation and prayer'.<sup>3</sup> At Santiniketan, Debendranath established a spiritual retreat, an ashram dedicated to the monotheistic faith espoused by the Brahmo Samaj. Significantly, the trust deed drawn up by Debendranath in 1888 stated that a school might be established there.<sup>4</sup> A decade later, work on that project was initiated by Balendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's nephew. The Brahma Vidyalaya, the school planned by Balendranath, was formally inaugurated shortly after his death in September 1899.<sup>5</sup>

Rabindranath was then looking after the family estates in Shelaidah, East Bengal. Unwilling to subject his children to the conventional education he abhorred, he established – for them – a home school at Shelaidah. Later, in a letter written to the scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858–1937) in August, 1901, he mentioned that he intended to set up a school at the Santiniketan ashram.<sup>6</sup> He wrote that it would be based on the ancient practice of acquiring education at the residence of a *guru*. On 22 December, 1901, the new school – his Brahmacharyashram – was formally inaugurated.

Here, a question may arise: Can Rabindranath be regarded as the founder of an ashram? After all, he established his Brahmacharyashram at the ashram founded by his father. Debendranath's Santiniketan ashram provided him with the material space his school needed. Moreover, the poet's ashram retained the spiritual principles and ethical objectives outlined in the trust deed created by his father. Nevertheless, we need to distinguish between the spiritual retreat envisioned by Debendranath and the ashram community that later emerged through Rabindranath's efforts to translate his educational ideas and ideals into praxis. In fact, during the early years of the century, Rabindranath saw his school (the Brahmacharyashram) and the Santiniketan Ashram as separate institutions. In a letter written in November 1902, he remarked that the interaction between the school and the Santiniketan ashram was not desirable.<sup>7</sup> Debendranath's ashram was a retreat used by occasional visitors. During the period 1901–1941, the poet's ashram evolved into a collectivity that was far more complex and elaborate than the rudimentary arrangements mentioned in the trust deed drawn up by his father. It is no wonder that the poet saw his ashram as his own creation. In several of his writings, he talks about his effort to found an ashram.<sup>8</sup>

In the initial years, Rabindranath's Brahmacharyashram was often referred to as the Brahma Vidyalaya. After the inception of Visva-Bharati, the Brahmacharyashram or the Brahma Vidyalaya was renamed Purva-Bibhaga. In 1925 it was given a new name – Patha-Bhavana. Nevertheless, the term 'ashram' and the ideas it evoked continued to be a part of the cultural identity of Rabindranath's institutions. Within that context, the term had two meanings. It denoted, as it still does, a material space, the area where Debendranath had established his ashram.<sup>9</sup> On a more abstract level, it was used as an umbrella term signifying the collective identity of the poet's institutions and the community they constituted. In Rabindranath's writings, it signifies an idea, an ideal way of collective living that the poet conceptualized and wished to bring forward through his institutions. It cannot be assumed, however, that the ashram or the *tapovana* was the only model available to Rabindranath's institutions. In his writings on Visva-Bharati, the ancient Buddhist learning centres of Nalanda and Taxila are mentioned, along with the Vedic *tapovanas*, as possible models.<sup>10</sup> Having said so, I should add that his belief in the idea of the ashram persisted throughout his life. This is evidenced by the fact that we find a detailed discussion of this ideal in an essay he wrote as late as in 1936.<sup>11</sup>

It is, however, important to remember that his conception of his ashram evolved constantly through an ideational process that occurred over a period of four decades. From his writings on his institutions, we can derive a sense of the fluidity of that concept. Rabindranath's Brahmacharyashram embodied a protest against the epistemic violence embedded in the colonial system of education. Like many of his contemporaries, he felt that colonial education served to produce passive consumers of Western knowledge and modernity.

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At his ashram, he sought to decolonize minds through an alternative education that had its roots in India's civilizational heritage.

For Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), an ashram was essentially a spiritual community, 'a community of men of religion'.<sup>12</sup> An ashram with a pedagogic function, Rabindranath's Brahmacharyashram embraced a set of spiritual and ethical ideals inherited from India's pre-colonial past. It attempted to regenerate those ideals through a mode of education that was, in fact, a way of living. The Brahmacharyashram foregrounded, among other principles, a spiritual perspective derived from the Sanskrit scriptures known as the Upanishads, a notion of a spiritual bond between the *guru* (teacher) and the *shishya* (pupil), and a simple, almost austere way of living that rejected the materialism often associated with colonial modernity and with modern Western culture. Rabindranath's nostalgic effort to revive the pedagogy of the *tapovana* was based upon a critique of the derivative urban modernity epitomized by the colonial city. Through his idea of the *tapovana*, he was trying to imagine an alternative space, a space where human beings could cultivate a sense of kinship with nature.

During the early years of the twentieth century, Rabindranath's school remained steeped in an ideological outlook that included nationalistic and revivalist sentiments. But soon his mode of thinking began to veer away from those sentiments. During its initial stages, he took an active part in the *Swadeshi* movement. He soon became disenchanted with its politics and began to distance himself from aggressive nationalism. This experience reinforced his belief that what India really needed was a constructive effort to deal with the fissures and inequalities present in its domain of social relationships.

During those politically turbulent years, his ashram underwent a process of subtle ideological realignment. It began to demonstrate a new emphasis on principles such as self-reliance, cooperation, joyfulness and creativity. In 1905, certain forms of democracy and self-rule were introduced into the ashram.<sup>13</sup> From around this period, his ashram began to interact with neighbouring villages and started engaging with their problems. These experiments expressed a new desire to see the ashram as an egalitarian and democratic community. It can be said that they marked the beginning of a process that ultimately culminated in the genesis of Sriniketan in the early 1920s.

On a microcosmic level, Sriniketan attempted to dismantle some of the major socio-economic inequalities that existed in the social milieu Rabindranath inhabited. Its effort to empower rural communities remained rooted in Rabindranath's conviction that India needed to gain *swaraj* (the right to self-rule) through a programme of constructive work that focused on *atma-shakti* (self-empowerment). Simultaneously, Visva-Bharati, his international university, challenged dominant discourses of nationalism by affirming the relevance of an ideal of cultural cooperation and unity. Rabindranath did not entirely reject national or civilizational boundaries. But through his university, he tried to provide an answer to the question as to how such boundaries could be traversed. His objective was to found a community that

remained grounded in India's civilizational identity and, at the same time, practised receptivity to other cultures. In his writings on *Visva-Bharati*, the poet vigorously argued in favour of categories of conduct such as friendship and hospitality.

At this point, it may be useful to examine how Rabindranath conceptualized 'community' as a category of collective living. In 'Bharatbarshya Samaj', an essay published in 1901, Rabindranath points out that in India what serves as the locus of unity is not the nation but *samaj*.<sup>14</sup> '*Samaj*' can be translated as 'society' or as 'community'. In fact, it usually denotes a system of relationships that lies somewhere between those two categories.<sup>15</sup> In this essay and in 'Swadeshi Samaj', a polemical essay written in 1904, *samaj* is defined as a network of social relationships that connects each individual with others. The author tells us that 'the main effort of Bharatbarsha (India) has always been to establish ties of kinship among human beings ...'<sup>16</sup>

In these essays, Rabindranath constructs an image of an ideal community that is sustained by values such as inclusivity, collaboration and self-reliance. He argues that in the West, individuals are not duty bound to support each other; it is the state that takes care of their welfare.<sup>17</sup> However, in India, 'the people are tied to each other through bonds of social duty'.<sup>18</sup> What holds *samaj* together is an ethos that reveals itself through the ways in which its inhabitants sustain one another through acts of generosity and self-sacrifice. In 'Swadeshi Samaj', one of Rabindranath's main arguments is that in the past *samaj* was never dependent on the state and that it could meet its needs autonomously. But he complains that it is increasingly becoming dependent on the colonial state.<sup>19</sup> Written at the historical moment when the anti-colonial *Swadeshi* movement was beginning to gather momentum, Rabindranath's essay calls for the emergence of a '*swadeshi samaj*' – a *samaj* that encompasses the whole of *swadesh* (motherland).<sup>20</sup> Through his conception of a *swadeshi samaj*, Rabindranath attempted to imagine an indigenous alternative to the colonial state. Moreover, the ethical justification for the empire, that is, the claim that it is beneficial to the colonized, could be rendered invalid by the idea of a self-reliant *swadeshi samaj*. What is particularly significant is the fact that the essays, 'Bharatbarshya Samaj' and 'Swadeshi Samaj', were written roughly during the time that saw the inception of Rabindranath's ashram school.

Rabindranath's writings on his institutions depict a community that consists of a network of ties of kinship. These ties connect the *guru* (the teacher) with the *shishya* (the pupil), the peasant with the *bhadralok* (the educated elite), the home with the world and humanity with nature. The basis of any experimental community is a set of shared values and principles. One of the main arguments of this book is that the poet's ashram found its spiritual basis in an idea of universal unity that was based on his personal reading of Upanishadic spirituality. At his ashram, he attempted to translate that spiritual idea into 'a community life' that foregrounded principles such as unity, inclusivity and collaboration.<sup>21</sup>

These ideals figure prominently in the writings where the poet talks about his educational experiments. What is particularly significant is the fact that many of these are, in fact, speeches addressed to the ashram community. Clearly, they illustrate an effort to establish a set of shared values that can hold the community together. Indeed, Rabindranath expected the inmates of his ashram to accept and internalize these ethical values. In a letter written to a teacher serving his school, he argues that at his institution activities, such as aesthetic creation and collaboration with neighbouring villages, are an important source of joy (*ananda*). He writes that those who ignore these aspects and focus exclusively on pedagogic processes cannot truly become a part of the institution.<sup>22</sup> In his memoirs Haricharan Bandyopadhyaya (1867–1959), a scholar who taught at Rabindranath's institution, writes that he was once rebuked by the poet for not taking part in the collective prayer meetings held at the ashram.<sup>23</sup> During the final years of his life, Rabindranath repeatedly urged the inmates of his ashram to develop a sense of belonging and responsibility. Through his addresses to the alumni of his institutions, he appealed to them to protect and preserve the ethical bases of the ashram.<sup>24</sup>

Rabindranath's ashram originated within a global historical context that produced a plurality of innovative ideas concerning modes of collective living. Many of those ideas were critiques of emergent forms of industrial capitalism. Ideas propounded by social thinkers such as Robert Owen (1771–1858), the Welsh reformer and Charles Fourier (1772–1837), the French ideologue, foregrounded the belief that society could be reorganized and reformed through ideal communities. Fourier believed that in the cooperative agricultural communities, he called 'phalanges' (phalanxes), wealth would be distributed equitably and labour would be rendered pleasurable through opportunities for free expression of passions. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, numerous experimental communities sprang up in various parts of the world. One well-known example is Brook Farm, an egalitarian community established by George Ripley (1802–1880) and Sophia Ripley (1803–1861) in Massachusetts in 1841. It drew upon Transcendentalism, a philosophical and literary movement, and the socialist ideas formed by Charles Fourier. Tolstoyan settlements, the settlements started by followers of the Russian author and ideologue Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), cultivated a way of life that involved an emphasis on Tolstoy's ideas of austerity, manual labour, vegetarianism and pacifism.

Ideas put forward by Western thinkers such as Henry Maine (1822–1888), Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin (1819–1900) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) profoundly influenced the way Gandhi imagined the communities he sought to establish.<sup>25</sup> Whereas Gandhi acknowledged his debt to Western influences, Rabindranath did not. His utterances efface such links by continuously harking back to the Upanishads and the idea of the *tapovana*. Interestingly, Rabindranath was familiar with some of the communitarian experiments that began in various parts of the world in the early twentieth century. These included, among others, the schools founded by the

German pedagogue Paul Geheeb (1870–1961) and his wife Edith Geheeb (1885–1982), the School of Wisdom established by the Philosopher Hermann Keyserling (1880–1946) at Darmstadt, Germany, in 1920 and the Dartington Hall Trust founded by Leonard Knight Elmhirst (1893–1974) and his wife Dorothy (1887–1968) in 1926.

It should be noted that the community imagined by the poet was, in many ways, similar to these communitarian experiments. Geheeb envisioned, as Rabindranath did, an ideal pedagogic community. The Odenwald School, founded by Geheeb in Germany in 1911, was intended to be a microcosmic representation of a transnational human collectivity bound together in bonds of cooperation and love.<sup>26</sup> Like Rabindranath's school, the Odenwald School encouraged its pupils to practice self-rule.<sup>27</sup> Like *Visva-Bharati* and the schools founded by the Geheebes, Keyserling's School of Wisdom aimed to bring about a synthesis of the cultures of East and West.<sup>28</sup> The affinities that existed among these institutions need not be explained through the question of whether they influenced each other. Such an explanation may ignore the fact that a complex interplay of larger historical realities shaped their conceptual bases. These institutions, including Rabindranath's ashram, should be recognized to be responses to a sense of crisis generated by realities specific to the national and global contexts wherein they emerged. In fact, they emerged within historical contexts that were similar to one another. Like Rabindranath, Keyserling and the Geheebes aggressively opposed political nationalism. During the Nazi era, the Geheebes left Germany and emigrated to Switzerland.

The founders of these extraordinary institutions saw each other as ideological allies. In a letter written to Rabindranath in 1929, Edith Geheeb remarked – 'We begin to see clearly that much of our work is already accomplished at Santiniketan'.<sup>29</sup> To Paul, Rabindranath later wrote – 'The only hope of saving civilization is through "enlightened" education and organizations like your Institut Monnier and my Santiniketan have indeed a great role to play'.<sup>30</sup> Michael Tolstoy, a son of Leo Tolstoy, identified Rabindranath as an ally and sought his help when, in the mid-1930s, he undertook a project of setting up a community. He informed the poet that he intended to set up 'a cooperative league' for a group of Russian emigrants.<sup>31</sup> In his letter, he wrote that the league would consist of people who wished 'to escape from the fallacious European civilization' and to embrace a way of living that affirmed the importance of spirituality, manual labour and a close relationship with nature.<sup>32</sup> Michael Tolstoy concluded his letter with a plea for help: 'I feel sure that my idea is near to and agrees with your philosophical outlook on life and so I beg you to consent to help our undertaking'.<sup>33</sup> The letters mentioned above establish the fact that Rabindranath took part in a global discourse on experimental modes of living.

Why, then, did Rabindranath try to construct an indigenous identity for his experimental community through the appellation 'ashram'? To find an answer to this question we should revisit the milieu within which his ashram



originated. It is important to remember that he belonged to a colonized nation, grappling with the problem of colonial rule. Central to this book is the perception that despite being a severe critic of the dominant discourses of nationalism, Rabindranath practised a cultural politics that had affinities with anti-colonial nationalist thought. Like many of his nationalist contemporaries, Rabindranath emphasized the importance of cultural autonomy and self-respect. But the category of collective selfhood he believed in was not the nation but civilization. This book argues that, as a community having an indigenous cultural identity, Rabindranath's 'ashram' embodied an attempt to challenge the hegemony of the colonizing nation and to bolster the cultural self-respect of the colonized. In short, the poet's attempt to imagine such a community can be seen as an act of cultural self-assertion. However, as noted earlier, that politics did not remain unchanged throughout the period 1901–1941. The conservatism and revivalist tendencies of the early years gradually gave way to a broader and more liberal outlook.

Rabindranath's introduction to a narrative written by Satischandra Ray (1882–1904), a young idealist who taught at his school, contains an exposition of the ideal that lay at the core of this experiment. It is interesting to note how it evokes a utopian vision of an idyllic space: Scholars dedicated to their pursuit of knowledge would assemble at Santiniketan and help build up the *tapovana*. Like the *rishis* (sages) who dwelt in the *tapovanas* of ancient India, they would renounce material aspirations and isolate themselves from the hustle and bustle of the city.<sup>34</sup> Rabindranath then explains why modern India needs such a *tapovana*. He writes: 'Like a deluge mighty Europe has come and conquered – bit by bit – everything we had. Now we must take refuge in the domain of selfless action, ideation, knowledge and spirituality'.<sup>35</sup> It is, he writes, a domain where we need not fight or compete, where 'we are beyond all attacks and above all forms of humiliation'.<sup>36</sup> The poet tells us that he wants his *tapovana* to be a space that 'is beyond all forms of oppression perpetrated by the rulers or by society'.<sup>37</sup> He acknowledges that a single *tapovana* cannot accommodate the whole of India but adds that, as an exemplary community of thinkers and ideologues, it may play a crucial role in propounding freedom of the mind. By liberating some of India's best minds, it can help liberate the mind of the entire nation. 'A few *tapovanas*', he writes, 'can free the entire country from the shackles of mental servitude'.<sup>38</sup>

But, as the founder of an ashram, Rabindranath was faced with a conundrum: How was he to make a seemingly archaic ideal acceptable to the present era? In his writings, he both anticipates and refutes the charge that his attempt to regenerate such an institution is quintessentially a retrogressive act. They suggest that, for him, the historicity of the real ashrams of the past was less important than the spiritual and ethical ideal the institution embodied. He was aware that it needed to be resuscitated in a way that was relevant to the needs of the twentieth-century world. In the essay 'The Teacher' (1930), he admits that 'in the purity of its original shape' the *tapovana* 'would be a fantastic anachronism in the present age'.<sup>39</sup> In order to be

acceptable to the current milieu, 'it must find its reincarnation under modern conditions of life'.<sup>40</sup> Rabindranath's attempt to rediscover the idea of the *tapovana* actually invested it with new meanings.

In other words, Rabindranath's ashram was not intended to be a mere replica of the ashrams of ancient India. In fact, the history of his conception of his ashram illustrates how the idea of the ashram acquired new meanings during the early twentieth century. During this period, a number of ashrams were founded by certain individuals or groups committed to certain social or political objectives. These included, apart from Rabindranath's ashram, the ashram established by Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) and those set up by Gandhi. Gandhi established the Satyagraha Ashram in Ahmedabad in 1915 and another ashram at Sevagram in 1936. Sri Aurobindo's ashram in Pondicherry formally came into being in 1926. However, the community it comprised had originated with Sri Aurobindo's arrival in Pondicherry in 1910.

During this period, the term 'ashram' could be applied not only to spiritual communities but also to any institution or community engaged in activities aiming at social welfare. Curiously, no significant attempt has yet been made to examine the significance of the fact that these experimental ashram communities came to be founded by prominent Indians at a crucial juncture in the history of modern India. Since, for Rabindranath, Gandhi was both an ally and an interlocutor, I have often used the Gandhian model of the ashram as a reference point. Besides, I have talked about Sri Aurobindo's writings on the ashram in Pondicherry. In other words, I have tried to look at these early twentieth-century ashrams from a comparative perspective.

Let me conclude this section by addressing a crucial question: How far did Rabindranath Tagore succeed in translating his idea of his ashram into something real? In the essay 'My School', he anticipates and responds to this question –

The question will be asked whether I have attained my ideal in this institution. My answer is that the attainment of all our deepest ideals is difficult to measure by outward standards. Its working is not immediately perceptible by results ... The feeling of respect for the ideal of this place and the life lived here greatly varies in depth and earnestness among those who have gathered in this *ashram*. I know that our inspiration for a higher life has not risen far above our greed for worldly goods and reputation. Yet I am perfectly certain ... that the ideal of the *ashram* is sinking deeper and deeper into our nature every day. The tuning of our life's strings into purer spiritual notes is going on without our being aware of it.<sup>41</sup>

The passage quoted above reveals Rabindranath's awareness of an unavoidable dichotomy between the ideal and the real. Nevertheless, it tells us that the poet chose to retain his faith in the ideal. In fact, for Rabindranath, it

was no less real or important than the actual community he had founded. He wanted to believe that it functioned slowly and sometimes imperceptibly within the domain of the soul.

It is true that the idea of the ashram or *tapovana* became a part of the collective imagination of the ashram community. I would like to illustrate this point through three textual examples. The first of these is the tale written by Satischandra Ray. Published after the untimely death of its author, this tale titled *Gurudakshina* is an emotionally charged story about the bond between a *guru* (teacher) and his *shishya* (student). In his introduction to this tale, Rabindranath writes that the mood of this narrative was partly inspired by the ambience of his ashram.<sup>42</sup> At the outset, the narrator exhorts the listeners, the boys of the Brahmacharyashram, to embark on an imaginary journey from a nondescript present to an ideal past represented by the *tapovana*.<sup>43</sup> The tale begins with an image of an ancient Indian *tapovana* that serves as an idyllic backdrop for the main action described by the narrator.<sup>44</sup> It narrates how Utanka, the central character, performed an arduous task to fulfil his obligation to serve his *guru*.

The second example I wish to mention is *The Ashram*, an English magazine published at the Brahmacharyashram. Started by the English missionary Charles Freer Andrews (1871–1940) in early 1914, this handwritten monthly magazine continued to be published until mid-1915. It published ashram news and writings contributed by students and teachers including Rabindranath, Andrews and William Winstanley Pearson (1881–1923). Through its name, the magazine acknowledged that it spoke on behalf of a community that saw itself as an ashram. The third text is *Santiniketane Ashramkanya*, a memoir written decades later by Amita Sen, a daughter of the scholar Kshitimohan Sen (1880–1960).<sup>45</sup> A nostalgic evocation of Santiniketan in the days of her childhood and youth, this book portrays a close-knit and harmonious community. What is particularly significant is the way in which the author of this memoir constructs a special identity for herself. Through the title of her memoir, she calls herself an ‘ashram *Kanya*’ – a daughter of the ashram.

## II

### *Memories, Memoirs and Histories*

Memoirs written by individuals associated with Santiniketan and Sriniketan offer interesting insights into the history and conceptual bases of Rabindranath's ashram. In their reminiscences, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya and Jnanendranath Chattopadhyaya talk about the earliest phase in the history of Santiniketan. They focus primarily on the history of the ashram founded by Debendranath Tagore.<sup>46</sup> But the majority of the memoirs available to us are concerned with the Brahmacharyashram or the Visva-Bharati phase. The list is quite impressive. It includes memoirs written by remarkable individuals like W.W. Pearson, Pramathanath Bishi, Rani Chanda, Pramadaranjan Ghosh, Amita Sen, Schlomith Flaum, Chitraniha Chowdhury and Shivani.<sup>47</sup>

The brief and essayistic reminiscences penned by Kshitimohan Sen and Haricharan Bandyopadhyaya are also significant.<sup>48</sup>

The authors of these memoirs nostalgically explore their memories of ‘ashram-*jivan*’ (ashram life).<sup>49</sup> In so doing, they depict a distinctive way of collective living that is simple, joyous and intensely creative. It is interesting to consider how these memoirs articulate a sense of community. One of the metaphors they recurrently use is that of ‘*paribar*’ (the family). In Bishi’s memoir, the ‘ashram *paribar*’ (the ashram family) is shown to be a close-knit community that consists of teachers, pupils and others associated with the institution.<sup>50</sup> Like the *tapovanas* depicted in Sanskrit literature, it is a community that includes non-human entities like trees.<sup>51</sup> At the centre of this community, one sees Rabindranath, the poet-educator, whom the inmates of his ashram reverentially called ‘*Gurudeva*’ (the Teacher). Indeed, in most of the memoirs mentioned here, Rabindranath’s dynamic presence is the focal point. In these accounts, the history of the place is juxtaposed with personal histories. In many of these memoirs, depictions of an ideal, happy past ignore or gloss over the harsh realities the ashram community experienced. They can be read as narratives embodying textual attempts to imagine a utopian space.

Ajitkumar Chakravarty’s *Brahma-Vidyalyaya* can be considered to be the earliest attempt to write a history of the poet’s school.<sup>52</sup> It is an insightful account of the first decade in the history of the school. In the early 1960s, two significant monographs were published: Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyaya’s *Santiniketan-Visva-Bharati* and Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee’s *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*.<sup>53</sup> Like Chakravarty, Mukhopadhyaya looks at the history of Santiniketan from the privileged perspective he gained as an insider. Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee’s book is a comprehensive account of the evolution of Rabindranath’s educational experiments. Through a survey of the poet’s educational writings, it attempts to situate that history within its discursive context.

Over the past few decades, Rabindranath Tagore’s role as an educator has been the subject matter of a number of publications in English and Bengali. Uma Das Gupta has written extensively about Rabindranath’s educational experiments – his school, his university and his Institute of Rural Reconstruction.<sup>54</sup> In her book Kathleen M. O’Connell has attempted to contextualize the poet’s role as an educator.<sup>55</sup> O’Connell traces the evolution of his educational ideas and examines some of the cultural, political and educational discourses that developed within his milieu.<sup>56</sup> In his book *Indo-German Exchanges in Education*, Martin Kampchen explores the friendship between Rabindranath Tagore and the German educators Paul and Edith Geheeb. It includes a comparative reading of their educational experiments.<sup>57</sup> Swati Ganguly’s book on the history of the university is a recent and significant contribution to this area of research.<sup>58</sup> It is a densely researched monograph that offers a panoramic view of ideas, institutions, people and

events. Over the years, some significant attempts have been made to narrate and analyse the history of individual institutions. In his book, Sudhir Sen, the agricultural scientist who joined Sriniketan in 1939, explores and attempts to evaluate the relevance of Rabindranath's contributions to rural reform.<sup>59</sup> Recently, Dikshit Sinha has authored a detailed account and analysis of the Sriniketan project and its historical context.<sup>60</sup> *Kabir Pathshala: Pathabhavan O Sikshasatrer Itibas*, a monograph authored by Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sircar, is a history of the two schools founded by Rabindranath – the Brahmacharyashram that later came to be known as Patha-Bhavana, and Sikshasatra, the school he established in Sriniketan for rural children in 1924.<sup>61</sup> The most recent addition to the body of writings on Sriniketan is *A History of Sriniketan: Rabindranath Tagore's Pioneering Work in Rural Reconstruction* by Uma Das Gupta.<sup>62</sup>

Some of the biographies of Rabindranath Tagore are important sources of insights into his role as an educator. The most notable example is *Rabijibani*, Prashanta Kumar Pal's multi-volume work.<sup>63</sup> Like biographies of Rabindranath, biographical sketches of others associated with Santiniketan and Sriniketan have also contributed to our understanding of the history of those places. Hirendranath Datta's *Santiniketaner Ek Yug* and Supriya Roy's *Makers of a Mission, 1901–1941* are collections of biographical sketches of some of the individuals who took part in the poet's educational experiments.<sup>64</sup>

More often than not, research done in the area attempts to situate Rabindranath within discourses of education. Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee talks about the possible 'influences' on the poet's perspective on education.<sup>65</sup> Kathleen M. O'Connell's book includes a comparative discussion of Rabindranath's educational ideas and some of the pedagogic ideas that emerged in the West.<sup>66</sup> However, the experimental communities, whose objectives were not predominantly pedagogical, received little attention. The ashram founded by Sri Aurobindo and the Gandhian ashram communities are rarely mentioned. Academic discussions on Sriniketan often mention the Gandhian model of *swaraj* as a relevant context.<sup>67</sup> But nothing significant has been written on the affinities or differences that existed between Rabindranath's Sriniketan and the Gandhian ashrams that focused on rural activism and reform.

There is a clear dearth of research on the poet's efforts to imagine and create a distinctive ashram community. Histories of his school and university generally acknowledge that, for Rabindranath, a certain idea of the ashram or *tapovana* was a major source of inspiration.<sup>68</sup> But they do not examine the centrality of this conceptual category in the context of his efforts to build a 'community'. Surprisingly, no significant attempt has yet been made to examine why he wished to revive or reinvent that age-old ideal. Gandhi's ashram experiments have been the subject matter of a number of scholarly enquiries. Mark Thomson's *Gandhi and His Ashrams* is a comprehensive survey of the history of those experimental communities.<sup>69</sup> Rabindranath's conception of his ashram community has yet to receive scholarly attention. In a brief

essay published in 1961, Asha Devi Aryanayakam talks about the ideological linkages between Rabindranath's ashram and the Indian tradition of ashram education.<sup>70</sup> It is an essay written by a person who lived and worked at Rabindranath's ashram. But it does not clearly historicize the poet's idea of his ashram. In an essay, Manabendra Mukhopadhyay has examined some of the contradictions and ambiguities that were present in Rabindranath's effort to translate his idea of the *tapovana* into praxis. However, the essay focuses mainly on the early history of the school.<sup>71</sup> The absence of any major research on Rabindranath's ashram community represents an important lacuna in existing scholarship on his life and times.

### III

#### *The Structure of This Book*

Rabindranath's conception of his ashram is not something that is self-evidently present in any individual writing. He articulated that concept through a wide range of writings and over a period of four decades. I have attempted to rediscover that idea by piecing together the fragments scattered among his Bengali and English writings and by situating them within relevant historical contexts. These writings are mainly essays, speeches, and letters written during the period 1901–1941. To be able to grasp this idea, I have paid particular attention to Rabindranath's understanding of the ancient institution of the ashram and examined the conceptual bases of Sri Aurobindo's ashram and the ashrams founded by Gandhi. Moreover, I have explored memoirs authored by teachers, former pupils and visitors in order to acquire a broad perspective on the relationship between the ideas and the praxis. The archival resources used in this book include unpublished material as well as published writings that are not easily accessible.<sup>72</sup> Significantly, it draws upon a large body of Bengali writings, many of which have not been translated before. My translations of these writings are not literal renderings of the original texts. In translating Rabindranath's stylistically complex writings, I have merely tried to grasp and convey the thoughts they articulate. The original Bengali titles of these writings have been retained.<sup>73</sup>

The first chapter of this book focuses on the milieu within which Rabindranath's ashram came into being. It begins with a survey of some of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ideas and discourses that made Rabindranath's ashram community imaginable. This chapter focuses on the cultural politics embedded in these discourses and explores how Rabindranath engaged with them. These include contemporary critiques of the colonial educational system, ideas of alternative modes of education and discourses of cultural reform and revival. It is important to remember how criticism of the colonial system of education shaped attempts to conceptualize and introduce alternative modes of education. Not surprisingly, many of these pedagogic experiments focused on being rooted in India's cultural inheritance. Within this context, attempts were made to rejuvenate

indigenous educational institutions such as the *gurukul* and the ashram. Clearly, this renewal of enthusiasm for pre-colonial modes of education was closely intertwined with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinking on socio-religious reform and revival. That is why it is necessary to explore discourses such as Brahmoism and Hindu revivalism and take a note of how Rabindranath responded to them. While he rejected blind revivalism, he nevertheless called for a selective appropriation of India's Hindu past. What he wished to rejuvenate was a set of ethical and spiritual values inherited from that past. Interestingly, for Rabindranath, the institution of the ashram was the ultimate repository of a set of values that were authentically Indian. This chapter includes a brief survey of ancient Indian ideas of '*āśrama*' and takes a close look at how Rabindranath reinvented those ideas. Furthermore, it introduces a larger perspective on the contemporary reinvention of the institution by talking about some of the other ashrams that emerged in India during the early twentieth century. Arguably, these were bound together by intimate ties of ideological kinship.

We are aware that ashrams are traditionally thought to be communities of men and women who practice a spiritual way of life. Bearing this in mind, the second chapter attempts to locate the spiritual and ethical bases of Rabindranath's ashram. Moreover, it is an attempt to understand why he chose to imagine his ashram as a community that was rooted in India's spiritual inheritance. To be able to do that, I needed to revisit the discursive context within which the ashram came into existence. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses of socio-religious reform and revival often perceived religion as a potent means of social regeneration. This chapter pays particular attention to a concept that gained prominence within that context – the concept of a dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, between a spiritual East and a materialistic West. Though Rabindranath was not unaware of the potential pitfalls of believing in essentialist categories such as a spiritual East and a materialistic West, he often used them strategically in order to bolster the self-respect of the colonized. This chapter focuses on how this concept shaped his thinking on education and his ashram. Indeed, Rabindranath consistently argued for an education that could help utilize India's spiritual heritage as a source of power. Not surprisingly, it was through his own educational institution that he tried to translate this ideal into praxis. It is important to remember that, during the early years of its history, Rabindranath's institution was meant to be an ashram dedicated to *brahmacharya*, an ancient pedagogic and spiritual ideal that stressed the importance of austerity and spiritual knowledge. It was an idea that helped him imagine a space that firmly rejected the culture of consumerism and embraced India's spiritual heritage. Rabindranath's ashram found its spiritual basis in his personal reading of the Upanishadic idea of universal oneness. In other words, its spiritual ethos was an ethical perspective that underlined the importance of principles like unity and inclusivity.



The next two chapters are based on the perception that this idea played a vital role vis-à-vis the ways in which the poet sought to envision his ashram as a community that practised inclusivity through its daily existence. The idea of *tapovana* helped him imagine a community that included not only human beings but also the natural environment. Chapter 3 pays particular attention to the spatial politics underlying his concept of the *tapovana* as a utopian alternative to urban existence. Interestingly, in Rabindranath's writings, the city and the *tapovana* represent not only material entities but also ideational spaces. To Rabindranath, who grew up in the colonial city of Calcutta, the modern city represented the hegemonic presence of a modernity borrowed from the West and introduced in India by colonial rule. Through his ashram – a modern *tapovana* – Rabindranath envisioned a return not to the real forest but to a set of values grounded in India's ancient past. My discussion of that idea invokes some of the critiques of urban living that emerged in India and in the West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More often than not, those critiques entailed attempts to imagine alternative spaces or modes of existence. What deserves special attention is the fact that his idea of such a space drew upon his profound awareness of the environmental problems caused by processes involved in industrial modernity.

Chapter 4 focuses on how the poet envisioned his ashram as a human collectivity. By embracing a spiritual ideal of oneness, Rabindranath's ashram transcended the ideological imperatives of narrow sectarianism. The history of Visva-Bharati, his international university, illustrates the emergence of a new type of ashram community where spirituality becomes an ethical way of living that acknowledges the importance of being inclusive. Rabindranath's objective was to initiate a process of interaction and mutual cooperation among diverse cultures and communities. This chapter talks about this ideal in order to address some of the nuances it entails. While Visva-Bharati called for unity and cooperation among human collectivities, it, at the same time, remained grounded in an ideal of selfhood that emphasized the relevance of India's intellectual and cultural resources. In his writings on Visva-Bharati, Rabindranath attempts to imagine a community that is capable of combining an awareness of selfhood with principles like tolerance and inclusivity.

Rabindranath's ashram rejected the inequalities and the paradigms of power and powerlessness that existed in colonial India. The fifth and final chapter focuses on the democratic and egalitarian principles his ashram upheld. It outlines how Rabindranath tried to decolonize minds through a distinctive way of living that emphasized the importance of self-reliance, democracy and creativity. Within the ashram community, this effort involved a radical transformation of the asymmetrical power relations that existed between teachers and pupils, between the rural peasantry and the urban educated elite, and between men and women. It talks about Rabindranath's conception of *swaraj* as self-reliance and examines how, in the early 1920s, Sriniketan, his Institute of Rural Reconstruction, undertook the task of training village communities to be self-reliant. That project drew upon a



radical critique of the socio-economic system that allowed cities to exploit villages. The poet hoped that at his ashram peasants and the *bhadralok* (the elite) would join hands to build up an alternative social order. Finally, this chapter addresses the question of whether the poet's ashram succeeded in challenging the inequalities built into dominant conceptions of gender roles and relations. It is true that Rabindranath himself sometimes articulated an essentialist conception of gender difference. But at his ashram, women were encouraged to transcend the boundaries of 'home' and to extend their presence into the larger social spaces of the community. Moreover, we shall see how he attempted to liberate their creative potentialities. The poet and his associates were trying to create a space where new modes of self-expression could be invented through significant experiments in the domain of the fine arts and the performing arts.

By all accounts, the poet's ashram was a close-knit community and a remarkably vibrant cultural space in its heyday. It would be wrong to assume that Rabindranath's death in 1941 abruptly changed everything. In fact, the institution and the community managed to retain their distinctiveness during the next few decades. Nevertheless, the idea of the ashram was gradually rendered redundant by a process of transforming Visva-Bharati into a normative university. This monograph ends with an epilogue that includes a discussion on this process of ideological transition. When, in the 1980s and 1990s, I was growing up in Santiniketan, the prevalent perception was that the university was increasingly becoming a conventional educational institution. Surely, Santiniketan could no longer be conceived of as an ashram community. Nevertheless, the place had a lot to offer. To begin with, some of Rabindranath's close associates were still alive and living in Santiniketan. Those extraordinary men and women were a living link between the past and the present. As a student of Patha-Bhavana, the poet's open-air school, I was privileged to experience a close relationship with the natural environment that surrounded me. That experience of growing up in Santiniketan or the memory of it later inspired me to explore the remarkable history of the place and its enduring cultural heritage. Furthermore, as a fourth-generation resident of Santiniketan, I had inherited precious memories. That legacy too played a part. This monograph is based on my doctoral research that I did at the Department of English (a Centre of Advanced Study), Faculty of Arts, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

This book hopes to be meaningful in a number of ways. One of the key objectives of this book is to fill a significant lacuna in existing scholarship on Rabindranath Tagore. By probing into his conception of his ashram, it may generate a new perspective on the intellectual history of Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, and Sriniketan. For those who are interested in Rabindranath Tagore's life and versatile creativity, this effort can be significant. After all, Rabindranath himself saw his university as the 'vessel' carrying his life's 'best treasure'.<sup>74</sup> December 2021 marked the centenary of the university's formal inauguration. In 2023, Santiniketan was finally included in UNESCO's list

of World Heritage Sites. Santiniketan's new status as a World Heritage Site stresses the importance of its historic buildings, gardens, and works of art. Moreover, it underlines the enduring value of Santiniketan's educational ideals and cultural traditions.

As we shall see, the poet's ashram was not just a material space but also a community and a way of living. This book calls attention to the fact that a number of experimental ashram communities emerged during the early twentieth century, a crucial period in the history of modern India. It may, therefore, pave the way for further research on how the idea of the ashram acquired new cultural and political relevance within certain anti-colonial discourses. I hope that this book's reading of Rabindranath's conception of his ashram as an anti-colonial space will be useful to those who have an interest in the history of colonial modernity and anti-colonial thought. It points to the possibility that the imagining of experimental communities can be intertwined with the imagining of larger national or civilizational collectivities. Rabindranath's ashram community was in many ways a synecdochic version of the India he envisioned. Finally, one has to acknowledge that his idea of an inclusive, socially conscientious and environmentally conscious community remains relevant in today's world – our world where lives are being ravaged by human conflicts and the effects of climate change. This book is for all those individuals who believe in the importance of peace, inclusivity and sustainability.

## Notes

- 1 In his English writings, Rabindranath spelt the Sanskrit word '*āśrama*' as ashram, *ashrama* and *asrama*. I have chosen the variant that is most commonly used in English. Since 'ashram' is now a part of the vocabulary of the English language, it has not been italicized. I have used diacritical marks exclusively in contexts where I explore the etymological origins of the word *āśrama* and its meanings within the framework of the ancient theological conceptions of the four *āśramas* as four ways of living. The purpose is to differentiate such special theological usages of the word from its common meaning.

Like *śrama* (weariness/labour/religious or ritual exertion), the word *āśrama* is derived from the verbal root *śram*. As Patrick Olivelle points out, it commonly denotes 'a residence where holy people live and perform religious austerities'. See Patrick Olivelle, *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2004), p. 16. In ancient Sanskrit literature, an ashram is typically depicted as a habitation situated in a *tapovana*, a *vana* (forest) where *tapas* (religious exertion) is performed. Not surprisingly, in Rabindranath's writings, the terms ashram and *tapovana* are often used interchangeably. In the next chapter, it will be necessary to examine what the word *āśrama* signifies vis-à-vis ancient theological conceptions of the four ideal ways of living.

- 2 Rabindranath Tagore, 'My School' (1917), in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* [Hereafter, *EWRT*], vol. 2, ed. Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), pp. 389–403, 399. This lecture was delivered during Rabindranath's second visit to America (September 1916–January 1917).
- 3 Rabindranath Tagore, 'My School' (1917), in *EWRT*, vol. 2, ed. Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 396.

- 4 See Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyaya, *Santiniketan-Visva-Bharati* (1962; Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2000), p. 21.
- 5 Probably due to Balendranath's absence, this school failed to start its work effectively.
- 6 Rabindranath Tagore to Jagadish Chandra Bose, August 1901, in *Chithipatra*, vol. 6, comp. Pulin Bihari Sen (1957; Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1993), pp. 35–36.
- 7 See Rabindranath Tagore to Kunjalal Ghosh, 13 November 1902, in *Chithipatra*, vol. 13, comp. Niranjan Sarkar and Anathnath Das (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1992), p. 172.
- 8 See Rabindranath Tagore, essay no. 18 (1938), in *Visva-Bharati*, in *Rabindra Rachanabali* [Hereafter, RR], vol. 14 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1989), pp. 287–89, 288. The text that is being cited is an untitled speech.
- 9 See Rabindranath Tagore, essay no. 2 (1941), in *Asramer Rup O Bikash*, in RR, vol. 14, pp. 227–30, 227. The untitled essay that is being cited was first published as a part of *Asramer Rup O Bikash* in 1941.
- 10 Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Centre of Indian Culture' (1919), in *EWRT*, vol. 2, pp. 469–91, 482.
- 11 See Rabindranath Tagore, essay no. 1 (1936), in *Asramer Rup O Bikash*, pp. 223–27. This essay was first published under the title 'Ashramer Shiksha'.
- 12 M. K. Gandhi, 'History of the Satyagraha Ashram,' in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 56 (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1999), pp. 142–93, 142. <http://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhi-literature/mahatma-gandhi-collected-works-volume-56.pdf>. Gandhi wrote this history in Gujarati in 1932. Navajivan Publishing House published *Satyagrahasbramno Itihas* in Gujarati in 1948. It was translated into English by Valji G. Desai and published by the Navajivan Publishing House under the title *Ashram Observances in Action* in 1955.
- 13 See Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyaya, pp. 48–9.
- 14 Rabindranath Tagore, 'Bharatbarshiya Samaj' (1901), in RR, vol. 2 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1986), pp. 622–5, 622–3.
- 15 For a discussion of the meanings of the term and Rabindranath's understanding of the idea it evoked, see Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 55–62.
- 16 Rabindranath Tagore, 'Swadeshi Samaj' (1904), in RR, vol. 2, pp. 625–41, 631. Translation mine.
- 17 Rabindranath Tagore, 'Swadeshi Samaj' (1904), in RR, vol. 2, p. 627.
- 18 Rabindranath Tagore, 'Swadeshi Samaj' (1904), in RR, vol. 2, p. 627. Translation mine.
- 19 Rabindranath Tagore, 'Swadeshi Samaj' (1904), in RR, vol. 2, pp. 626, 628.
- 20 Rabindranath Tagore, 'Swadeshi Samaj' (1904), in RR, vol. 2, p. 634.
- 21 In an essay titled 'My School', he states that at his school the teachers and students lived 'a community life'. See Rabindranath Tagore, 'My School' (1931), in *EWRT*, vol. 3, ed. Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), pp. 641–5, 643.
- 22 Rabindranath Tagore to Tejeschandra Sen, 1939, File: Tejeschandra Sen, Correspondence Files (Bengali), Rabindra-Bhavana Archives, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.
- 23 Haricharan Bandyopadhyaya, 'Gunasmriti,' in *Rabindra-Prasanga* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1999), pp. 23–27, 26.
- 24 See the addresses collected in the volume *Praktani*. Rabindranath Tagore, *Praktani* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1959).
- 25 For a discussion of how Gandhi came to be influenced by these Western thinkers, see Mark Thomson, *Gandhi and His Ashrams* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1993), pp. 15–33.

- 26 See Hans-Ulrich Grunder, 'Paul Geheeb and the Ecole d' Humanite in Switzerland,' *European Education* 29, no. 1 (1997): pp. 34–46, 42.
- 27 Hans-Ulrich Grunder, 'Paul Geheeb and the Ecole d' Humanite in Switzerland,' *European Education* 29, no. 1 (1997): pp. 43–4.
- 28 Martin Kampchen, 'Rabindranath Tagore and Hermann Keyserling: A Difficult Friendship,' *Asiatic* 5, no. 1 (2011): pp. 1–18, 7.
- 29 Edith Geheeb to Rabindranath Tagore, 1 October 1929, File: Paul Geheeb and Edith Geheeb, Correspondence Files (English and other Languages), Rabindra-Bhavana Archives, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.
- 30 Rabindranath Tagore to Paul Geheeb, 8 August, 1936, File: Paul Geheeb and Edith Geheeb, Correspondence Files (English and other Languages), Rabindra-Bhavana Archives, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan. Geheeb was, at that point in time, director of the Institut Monnier.
- 31 Michael Tolstoy to Rabindranath Tagore, 8 September 1935, File: Michael Tolstoy, Correspondence Files (English and other Languages), Rabindra-Bhavana Archives, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.
- 32 Michael Tolstoy to Rabindranath Tagore, 8 September 1935, File: Michael Tolstoy, Correspondence Files (English and other Languages), Rabindra-Bhavana Archives, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.
- 33 Michael Tolstoy to Rabindranath Tagore, 8 September 1935, File: Michael Tolstoy, Correspondence Files (English and other Languages), Rabindra-Bhavana Archives, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.
- 34 Rabindranath Tagore, introduction to *Gurudakshina*, by Satischandra Ray (1904; Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1962), pp. 5–19, 11.
- 35 Rabindranath Tagore, introduction to *Gurudakshina*, by Satischandra Ray (1904; Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1962), p. 13. Translation mine.
- 36 Rabindranath Tagore, introduction to *Gurudakshina*, by Satischandra Ray (1904; Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1962), p. 13. Translation mine.
- 37 Rabindranath Tagore, introduction to *Gurudakshina*, by Satischandra Ray (1904; Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1962), p. 11. Translation mine.
- 38 Rabindranath Tagore, introduction to *Gurudakshina*, by Satischandra Ray (1904; Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1962), p. 14. Translation mine.
- 39 Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Teacher' (1930), in *EWRT*, vol. 3, pp. 154–60, 155. It is one of the lectures delivered as the Hibbert Lectures in 1930. These lectures constitute *The Religion of Man*, first published in 1930.
- 40 Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Teacher' (1930), in *EWRT*, vol. 3, 155.
- 41 Rabindranath Tagore, 'My School,' in *EWRT*, vol. 2, p. 398.
- 42 Rabindranath Tagore, introduction to *Gurudakshina*, p. 17.
- 43 Satischandra Ray, *Gurudakshina*, pp. 27–9.
- 44 Satischandra Ray, *Gurudakshina*, pp. 30–6.
- 45 Amita Sen, *Santiniketane Ashramkanya* (Kolkata: Tagore Research Institute, 1977).
- 46 Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya and Jnanendranath Chattopadhyaya, *Santiniketan Ashram* (Kolkata: Thacker Spink, 1950).
- 47 W. W. Pearson, *Shantiniketan: The Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan, 1917). Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindranath O Santiniketan* (1944; Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1975). Rani Chanda, *Shob Hote Apon* (1984; Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1994). Pramadaranjan Ghosh, *Amar Dekha Rabindranath O Tnar Santiniketan* (1963; Kolkata: Lalmati, 2015). Schломith Flaum, *The Wandering of a Daughter of Israel... Memories, Journeys and Meetings*, in *From Lithuania to Santiniketan: Schломith Flaum and Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Shimon Lev (New Delhi: Lithuanian Embassy, 2018), pp. 25–144. Chitraniha Chowdhury, *Rabindrasmriti* (Dhaka: Bengal Publications, 2017). Shivani,

- Amader Shantiniketan*, trans. Ira Pande (Gurugram: Penguin Random House India, 2021).
- 48 Kshitimohan Sen, 'Rabindranath O Tnahr Ashram,' in *Rabindranath-O-Santiniketan* (Kolkata: Punashcha, 2009), pp. 15–25. Haricharan Bandyopadhyaya, 'Gunasmriti,' pp. 23–7.
- 49 The word 'ashram-jivan' has been used by Pramathanath Bishi. See Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindranath O Santiniketan*, p. 34.
- 50 Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindranath O Santiniketan*, pp. 83–9.
- 51 Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindranath O Santiniketan*, p. 84.
- 52 Ajitkumar Chakravarty, *Brahma-Vidyalyaya* (1911; Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1951).
- 53 Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyaya, *Santiniketan-Visva-Bharati* (1962; Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2000). Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore* (1962; New Delhi: Routledge, 2013).
- 54 See, for instance, Uma Das Gupta, 'Santiniketan and Sriniketan,' in *Introduction to Tagore*, ed. Bhudeb Chaudhuri et al. (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1983), pp. 85–105. She has edited *The Oxford India Tagore: Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism*, a collection of Rabindranath's writings on his life, his views on education and a range of social and political issues. Uma Das Gupta, ed., *The Oxford India Tagore: Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 55 Kathleen M. O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2002).
- 56 Ajit K. Neogy's *The Twin Dreams of Rabindranath Tagore: Santiniketan and Sriniketan* is a descriptive account of the history of Tagore's institutions. See Ajit K. Neogy, *The Twin Dreams of Rabindranath Tagore: Santiniketan and Sriniketan* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010). *Rabindranather Santiniketan O Sriniketan* is a collection of essays on a range of themes such as the phases in the history of Santiniketan and Sriniketan, the institutions founded by the poet and facets of the pedagogy practised at those institutions. See Tapan Som, ed., *Rabindranather Santiniketan O Sriniketan* (Kolkata: Dip Prakashan, 2010). A slim volume, Kumkum Bhattacharya's *Rabindranath Tagore: Adventure of Ideas and Innovative Practices in Education*, is a part of a series concerned with key thinkers in education. See Kumkum Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore: Adventure of Ideas and Innovative Practices in Education* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2014).
- 57 Martin Kampchen, *Indo-German Exchanges in Education: Rabindranath Tagore Meets Paul and Edith Geheeb* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 58 Swati Ganguly, *Tagore's University: A History of Visva-Bharati; 1921–1961* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2022), p. 22.
- 59 Sudhir Sen, *Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction and Community Development in India* (1943; Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1991).
- 60 Dikshit Sinha, *A Poet's Experiment In Rebuilding Samaj and Nation: Sriniketan's Rural Reconstruction Work, 1922–1960* (Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2019). It is largely based on a Bengali monograph published in 2011. See Dikshit Sinha, *Rabindranather Pallypunargathan Prayas* (Kolkata: Pashchim Banga Bangla Academy, 2011).
- 61 Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sircar, *Kabir Pathshala: Pathabhavan O Sikshasatrer Itihas* (Kolkata: Signet Press, 2015). In 2021, this book was translated into English. Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sircar, *The Poet's School: A History of Pathabhavana and Siksha-Satra*, trans. Sarbajaya Bhattacharya and Sujaan Mukherjee (Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, 2021).
- 62 Uma Das Gupta, *A History of Sriniketan: Rabindranath Tagore's Pioneering Work in Rural Reconstruction* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2022).

- 63 Prashanta Kumar Pal, *Rabijibani*, Vols. 1–9 (Kolkata: Ananda, 1986–2003).
- 64 Hirendranath Datta, *Santiniketaner Ek Yug* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1980).  
Supriya Roy, *Makers of a Mission, 1901–41* (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 2001).
- 65 Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee, pp. 417–24.
- 66 See Kathleen M. O’Connell, pp. 223–57.
- 67 Kathleen M. O’Connell, pp. 217–22.
- 68 See Himangshu Bhushan Mukherjee, pp. 59–62, 431–4. Also see Swati Ganguly, *Tagore’s University: A History of Visva-Bharati; 1921–1961*, p. 12.
- 69 Mark Thomson, *Gandhi and His Ashrams* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1993).
- 70 Asha Devi Aryanayakam, ‘Tagore and Ashram Ideal of Education,’ in *Rabindranath Tagore Birth Centenary Celebrations: Proceedings of Conferences*, vol. I (Education), ed. Sunilchandra Sarkar (Santiniketan: Visva-bharati, 1961), pp. 8–17. Asha Devi Aryanayakam joined Tagore’s school in 1930 and became its *adhyaksha* (Rector) in 1932. In 1937, she joined Gandhi’s Sevagram ashram to take up the work of Basic Education.
- 71 Manabendra Mukhopadhyay, ‘Rabindra-chetanae “Tapoban”’: Grahana, Barjan o Utsaran,’ in *Rabindranather Santiniketan O Sriniketan*, pp. 86–100.
- 72 I accessed these resources at the Rabindra-Bhavana, Santiniketan and at Devon Record Office, Exeter, United Kingdom.
- 73 All non-English words, except titles of writings and names of institutions, have been italicized here.
- 74 Rabindranath Tagore to M.K. Gandhi, Santiniketan, 2 February 1940, in *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915–1941*, ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997), p. 178.