

Chapter 5

Extension of the Self and Rural Reconstruction

Abstract Tagore gained his first insight into the condition of the Indian peasant during the decade (1890–1900) he looked after the family estates where he made two important discoveries: first, the villagers seemed to have lost all ability to help themselves and secondly, both research and technical assistance would be needed if they were to learn how to rescue themselves from their creeping decay. This idea was indeed way ahead of his times—that education and knowledge could be pressed into professional service of the needy and the excluded that he demonstrated in his institution in Sriniketan (the twin campus to Santiniketan). This chapter not only traces the historical development of Tagore’s ideas of rural reconstruction or the Sriniketan Experiment but also raises some important questions that are relevant in the functioning of the university even today. Rabindranath believed that there were many syncretic strands and patterns that made a composite culture and there was the danger of the strands and streams drying up because of the urban-driven nature of development. L. K. Elmhirst, British agricultural scientist, was one of the chief architects of the Sriniketan experiment that started functioning in 1922 with the objective, ‘To bring back life in its completeness into the villages making them self-reliant and self-respectful, acquainted with the cultural traditions of their own country and competent to make an efficient use of the modern resources for the improvement of their physical, intellectual and economic condition’. Varied and multi-faceted programmes including mass and continuous education were undertaken in Sriniketan for the fulfilment of the above objective.

Keywords Education and extension • Rural reconstruction • Rural-urban divide • Syncretism and complete education • Mass education

... by country we mean the country of the gentlefolk alone. The common people we contemptuously describe as the “lower class”. This appellation has entered into our marrow since a long time now. ... We belong to the same country, yet we are strangers to one another.¹

¹ Rabindranath Tagore (henceforth RNT), *Russia-r Chithi*, 1931, *Rabindra Rachanavali* (henceforth RR), Volume 10, 1989, pp. 551–616

5.1 Bridging the Divide

Tagore wrote² about how history could be taught to common people through the means of folk tales and the practice of folk theatre and performance narrators (*Jatra* and *Kathakata*).³ These means, he added, could be used for people who had not been able to avail of education but had the desire to know. Knowledge of history was important as it informed people of what the heritage had been and what significant things needed to be preserved; that knowledge of history provided a direction to aspirations; Tagore affirmed that often the disparity between the educated and the uneducated was the absence of a historical perspective and that this difference could easily be removed. He mentioned how historical novels and plays were the accepted means of history education in Europe. In the essay a practical Tagore advocated the use of indigenous means and methods to spread **quality** education to the masses. He stressed on mass education as well as on the quality of that education.

Tagore gained his first insight into the condition of the Indian peasant during the decade (1890–1900) he looked after the family estates in Selidaha and Patisar. Kripalani wrote, ‘Much as he may have shied at first from this onerous responsibility, he was later grateful to his father for having yoked him to it. ...the years he thus spent in the heart of rural Bengal widened and strengthened his intimacy with nature which he loved and provided glimpses into the varied landscape of his country which he otherwise might not have known. This was rich food for his poetry. But even richer were the insights he gained into the life of the common people, their drudgery and constant struggle against the freaks of nature, the callous indifference of landlords and the no less callous indifference of a rigid social orthodoxy and an alien political rule. This first-hand knowledge gave him the insight into the lives of the people and an understanding of the scope of these lives’.⁴ Elmhirst in his personal reminiscences of his meeting with Tagore in New York in 1920 wrote, ‘Around December 1890 his father sent him, then 29 years of age, to live on and to manage the Tagore family properties in East Bengal. There he made two important discoveries: first, that the villagers seemed to have lost all ability to help themselves; secondly, that both research and technical assistance would be needed if they were ever to learn how to rescue themselves from their creeping decay’.⁵ Tagore had written, ‘There should be some common sharing of life with the tillers of the soil and the humble workers in the neighbouring villages; studying their crafts, inviting them to feasts, joining them in works of cooperation for communal welfare; and in our

² RNT, *Itihas Katha*, RR, Volume 6, 1988, pp. 722–723.

³ The power of the medium of *Jatra* and *Kathakata* is potent even today—public campaigns of social reform and uplift of people are advocated by the traditional minstrels and other folk performers travelling from one place to another in rural India; the *Patuas* of Bengal also perform this role.

⁴ Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, 2008, pp. 144–145.

⁵ L. K. Elmhirst, *Poet and Plowman*, 2008, (2nd Edition), pp. 1–2. Elmhirst undertook the work of Rural Reconstruction from its beginning in *Visva-Bharati*.

intercourse we should be guided, not by moral maxims or the condescension of social superiority, but by natural sympathy of life for life'.⁶

Later, Tagore elucidated, '...it occurred to me that there was a formidable gulf that existed between man and man. This gulf had to be removed till all men could be released in the vast universe of man'.⁷ These then were the ideational beginnings of the work in the field of education undertaken by Tagore in the third phase of his work, the Sriniketan Experiment of Rural Reconstruction. He started thinking about the issues of education for the rural people during his stay in the family estates (1890–1901). He went on to establish a school in Santiniketan that later transformed and grew into a university while maintaining the symbiotic links between elementary and higher education and finally, Tagore came full circle to his earlier focus on amelioration and enhancement of the conditions of village life and bridging the gulf between man and man in what he had apprehended would be; 'the terribleness of the weak and the challenge of the disarmed. The dumb fury of the downtrodden... would one day burst into a flame of disastrous revolution... unless handled with sympathy and love'.⁸ In many of his writings, he placed emphasis on the need to include the community within the fold of education and his belief that the natural role of a university was to extend itself to the community outside of its system so that neighbours were not strangers to each other separated by the gulf of education. Such an idea was not part of the consciousness of people. In 1912, Tagore purchased a mansion-like building along with some land in Surul village not far from his ashrama in Santiniketan. This building was known as *Kuthi Bari*, and in 1923, Tagore named this new acquired area, Sriniketan; thus, there were now two campuses at about 3 km distance from each other—Santiniketan and Sriniketan or the twin campuses of Visva-Bharati. Tagore situated the work of his Rural Reconstruction in Sriniketan and hence the name, Sriniketan Experiment.

Though Tagore turned to the ancient texts when he had started thinking about manifesting his ideas of education and found his ideal in the ancient forest hermitages of harmony and peace as the appropriate location for meaningful and complete education; for his university, he looked to the world for his ideas on internationalism and humanism. For his village development work, he looked ahead to the distant future—there was no precedence or parallel for the kind of work that he started in the villages in that time. He transformed his ideas into action by the application of knowledge to the problems of real situations in order to solve them and bring about sustained change in the desired direction among the masses of rural India. Social reformers who were his idols like Ram Mohun Roy had concentrated their efforts in bringing about changes in existing structures of social laws, dispensations and policies; very few of them had actually got down to the grass roots so to say; in contrast, Tagore got down to the task as if with his entire mind and body. This was indeed way beyond his times.

⁶ RNT, 'An eastern University', 1922, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 2 (henceforth EWRT2), p. 568.

⁷ RNT, 2nd Talk, 23 December 1923, Visva-Bharati, RR, Volume 14, 1991, pp. 239–296.

⁸ RNT, 'The Modern Age', *Creative Unity* (1922), EWRT2, pp. 542–543.

5.2 The Yester Years (1922–1941)

I shall try to present a comparative discussion of the **there and then** of Rabindranath's Sriniketan experiment of Rural Reconstruction that could be compared with the **here and now**—how much of the two are comparable and how the present has been reshaped and readjusted in order to assess whether Visva-Bharati is on the desired trajectory set in motion by the founder. Has the institution in the present context been able to internalize the founding values and principles about the 'giving' and 'taking' between the urban 'educated' and the rural 'uneducated' individuals? It would be grossly wrong to dismiss the rural population as uneducated because they are illiterate; there are individuals among them who are reflective; there are many who in their professions or chosen occupations are experts, while there are many who aspire to transcend their situation through modern education but feel stymied when faced with the existing education systems. Did the institution have some inbuilt mechanisms by which the 'illiterate' rural individuals were given not only a hearing but were considered to be at par? Did it respond to the needs of the time and situation? Has Visva-Bharati in the present been able to expand on this work and enlarge the range of inclusion that Tagore envisaged? How has Visva-Bharati, over the years, synchronized and synthesized its educational efforts and the work of Rural Reconstruction?

The history (of the Sriniketan Experiment) enjoins us to build upon the repertoire of evolved strengths through continuous engagement with the reality of the rural situation and to prepare oneself through the engagement to undertake the multi-dimensional tasks called for in this endeavour. These were the core values of the experiments Rabindranath conducted, be they on education or rural reconstruction—the values by which one enriched the self as well as the other. In other words, the formation of the complete person was through mutual exchange of knowledge, goodwill, respect and faith in the idea that human categories or groups were complementary to each other. In Rabindranath's conception of education, the roles of the teacher and the taught were not exactly the one of the 'giver' and the 'given'. The recipient villager was not to be seen as a passive 'taker' and the service provider as the dominant 'giver'. Through this exchange, the villagers were enabled to exercise their own agency in order to negotiate advantageously with the demands and pace of a changing world and thus overcoming their circumstances. Rabindranath learned from his direct experience of rural life of the crippling social customs, superstitions, and credit procedures on the one hand, and on the other, he learnt about the power of the folk culture and its many forms, the natural wisdom of the people and their general fortitude in the face of abject poverty. Tagore had abiding faith in the strength of village society; he described village life as being the cradle of civilization, 'At one time our rural society was living (vibrant). It is through this society that the link of union of the whole country was forged and the current of knowledge, service, and religion flowed into the villages. ... Our educated classes have perused from beginning to end the history of all manner of movements in the west, but are unaware that among our masses too innumerable movements have been taking place. ... There are so many religious sects like the

Auls and Bauls among the masses... in many respects there is greater profundity in these than in the newfangled religious efforts of the upper classes; the literature that has grown up among these sects, too, is worthy of respect and preservation'.⁹

In human exchange, it is natural for interactions to be loaded on any one side, and when the exchange is between the 'educated' and the 'uneducated', the loading is predictable and is often a handicap in fostering true exchange or understanding based on reciprocity. That the dialogue between the 'urban' and the villager is 'loaded' does not need to be emphasized. It is in this context of righting the balance that we ask what attitudes underlined Sriniketan's approach to the villages in which it organized its programmes. How did this work impact on the lives of people and their relationship with Visva-Bharati?

What were the early programmes that Tagore undertook with which he started this work? Initially, the setting of this work was in Selaidaha and Patisar, the two family estates of the Tagore family. He had started cooperative banking, encouraged village crafts and cottage industries, expanded primary and adult education, improved village roads and rural hygiene, established a library and a laboratory for agricultural research while he was on his family estates. All his efforts there did not meet with complete success while some efforts failed completely; for manifold causes; chief among them was the distrust of the villagers who looked upon any kind of such initiative with suspicion and a feeling that it (welfare measure) was at the cost of their salvation ensuring for the landlord his place in heaven in the other life! This gradually led Tagore to think along lines of 'community responsibility and transformation of individual consciousness at all levels through education and grassroots involvement'.¹⁰

Tagore sent his son Rathindranath in 1906 to study agriculture in the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA, and on his return in 1909, Tagore with his son set out to create the kind of society he had in mind in rural Bengal. He sent Rathindranath to the family estates to see first-hand the multiple programmes that had been initiated there. In a letter to Abala Bose, Tagore wrote, 'Arrangement has been made so the villagers should be able to undertake welfare measures themselves by repairing roads, removing the dearth of water, settling disputes by arbitration, establishing schools, clearing jungles, providing against famines by setting up Dharma-golas (grain storage banks), etc., and in every way to contribute their share in village welfare'.¹¹ Tagore set up an agricultural bank at Patisar, one of the family estates, first with borrowed money and later with the donation of the Nobel award prize; a village society to provide educational facilities for children that

⁹ RNT, 'Education for Rural India', *Introduction to Tagore*, 1997, pp. 23–26; the Auls and Bauls are the sects of wandering minstrels who propagate a way of life that is based on equality of people in the eyes of God and freedom from all social restrictions that separate man from man or woman.

¹⁰ Kathleen M. O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator*, 2012 (2nd Edition), p. 281.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 283. Abala Bose was Sir Jagadish Bose's (the scientist) wife; both of them were closely linked with Tagore's work and personally his close friends.

included primary schools and one high school as well as crop diversification and the establishment of a weaving school. These evidences of the initial 'experiments' that Tagore conducted in addressing the conditions of his subjects in his care in the family estates indicated a conjoined effort to 'see' the situation from as many angles as possible. He was conscious of the fact that human conditions were rarely caused by isolated factors; but by factors that were enmeshed in each other in such a manner that when isolated, any one factor would cease to have much impact when addressed exclusively. Concentrating on solving each problem in isolation would have led to very little success.

Rabindranath believed in the many syncretic strands and patterns embellishing a culture that too a culture with a long history as a civilization, as coming from its many components—folk, classical and indigenous, spread through the length and breadth of the country from its ancient past to its present.¹² He bemoaned the increasing impoverishment of the cultural fabric of once vibrant villages at the cost of 'developing' towns and urban lifestyles. He had eloquently expressed the imbalanced relationship of the town and the village with the analogy of a social system that only fed the brain (towns) leaving the limbs (villages) paralysed—urban-driven nature of all development resulted in the utter impoverishment of the villages and in other words, the majority of the nation as the country was chiefly composed of villages. Could the educated, who were greatly responsible for this skewed growth, have called this development? This ethical question was also echoed by Gandhi who advocated the idea of the Village Republic in order to obviate the stultifying effects of urbanization and of the State. 'My Idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary. Thus every village's first concern would be to grow its own food crops, and cotton for its cloth. It should have reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding ganja, tobacco, opium and the like. The village will maintain a village theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own waterworks ensuring clean water supply. This can be done through controlled wells or tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course. As far as possible every activity will be conducted on the co-operative basis. There will be no castes such as we have today with their graded untouchability'.¹³

L. K. Elmhirst, British Agricultural Scientist, studying agriculture at Cornell, USA, came to Santiniketan in November 1921 on an invitation that Tagore had made to him in New York in early 1920. Elmhirst had had previous experience in India in the field of agriculture. He was briefed by Tagore on what Tagore wanted to do in the surrounding villages of the newly purchased farm and building in Surul village some distance away from Santiniketan. Visva-Bharati had just been established. Elmhirst discussed his own plans in some detail and found that some

¹² Cf. Rabindranath Tagore, 'Message of India's History' *Introduction to Tagore*, p. 7.

¹³ M. K. Gandhi, 'Every Village a Republic', *Harijan*, 26 July, 1942. <http://www.mkgandhi.org/indiadreams/chap24.htm>.

of the groundwork had already been started. Elmhirst was deeply impressed by Tagore's vision and schemes for village uplift and took up the challenge to steer the work. He was also instrumental in ensuring an annual recurring grant of about Rs. 50,000 by a wealthy American philanthropist, Dorothy Straight, for the project. She later became Elmhirst's wife.

The Institute of Rural Reconstruction or Sriniketan was inaugurated on 6 February 1922 and Elmhirst was its first Director. Thus, Tagore, Elmhirst and Dorothy from three continents came together for this momentous work for the sake of humanity. In spite of the financial strain brought about by the Second World War, Dorothy's generous grant continued up to 1941. 'It would be little exaggeration to say that during the period which (Elmhirst) spent at Sriniketan; he truly laid the foundation of the Institute. But for his efforts it could not have attained its present stature. On many occasions Tagore has acknowledged the services rendered by Leonard Elmhirst'.¹⁴ This new institution nevertheless had to face severe handicaps and financial stress. Funds were continuously required for acquiring more land in order to set up model agricultural farms, sheds for cottage industries, farms for dairy, poultry, etc., and for wells to be dug for supply of water, in other words to build the infrastructure. Animals had to be procured and the place had to be protected against soil erosion through tree planting on a massive scale. Sanitation and water drainage systems were almost non-existent and that was one of the causes that the area was malaria-infested. There were other M's also—monkey and mistrust, and it was against these three M's, malaria, monkeys and mistrust, that the battle had to be fought.¹⁵

The central ideal of the Institute is stated by Tagore in the following words:

The object of Sriniketan is to bring back life in its completeness into the villages making them self-reliant and self-respectful, acquainted with the cultural traditions of their own country, and competent to make an efficient use of the modern resources for the improvement of their physical, intellectual and economic condition.¹⁶

The aims and objectives of the Institute are as follows¹⁷:

- To win the friendship and affection of villagers and cultivators by taking a real interest in all that concerns their life and welfare and by making a lively effort to assist them in solving their most pressing problems.
- To take the problems of the village and the field to the classroom for study and discussion and to the experimental farm for solution.
- To carry the knowledge and experience gained in the classroom and the experimental farm to the villagers, in the endeavour to improve their sanitation and health; to develop their resources and credit; to help them to sell their produce and buy their requirements to the best advantage; to teach them better method

¹⁴ Sudhir Sen, *Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction*, 1991 (Revised), pp. 150–151.

¹⁵ Kathleen M. O'Connell, op. cit., p. 287.

¹⁶ RNT, *Visva-Bharati Bulletin*, No. 11, 1928, p. 1.

¹⁷ RNT, *Visva-Bharati Bulletin*, No. 6, 1925.

of growing crops and vegetables and of keeping livestock; to encourage them to learn and practise arts and crafts; and to bring home to them the benefits of associated life, mutual aid and common endeavour.

- To work out practically an all-round system of elementary education in the villages based on the Boy Scout ideal and training, with the object of developing ideas of citizenship and public duty such as may appeal to the villagers and be within their means and capacity.
- To encourage in the staff and students of the Department itself a spirit of sincere service and willing sacrifice in the interests of and on terms of comradeship with their poorer, less educated and greatly harassed neighbours in the villages.
- To train the students to a due sense of their own intrinsic worth, physical and moral, and in particular, to teach them to do with their own hands everything which a village householder or cultivator does or should do for a living, if possible, more efficiently.
- To put the students in the way of acquiring practical experience in cultivation, dairying, animal husbandry, poultry-keeping, carpentry, smithing, weaving, tanning, practical sanitation work and in the art and spirit of cooperation.
- To give the students elementary instruction in the sciences connected with their practical work to train them to think and record the knowledge acquired by them for their own benefit and for that of their fellowmen.

In Sriniketan, there were four kinds of programmes—(1) **research** comprising surveys of the villages to uncover the problems, and experiment with villagers in farms, workshops and laboratories. (2) **Education** included a range of activities: the social education of the villagers in order to make them aware and develop skills for self-help and cooperation; the training and education of the students and workers of the institute and other departments of Visva-Bharati with a view to arousing in them genuine interest in problems of villagers and common people and a desire to learn about them and help them in every way to reorient their life in a spirit of cooperation and fellowship; vocational education of trainees from neighbouring villages as well as from other parts of the country in various branches of agriculture, arts and crafts; and all-round education of the children of neighbouring villages in order to develop in them qualities of efficient citizenship and community leadership. (3) **Service** included demonstrating to the villagers better methods in agriculture and industries and extension services rendered by the students and workers of the institute towards maintenance of village roads, sanitation, health education and general amenities and entertainment; and finally (4) **Commerce**—branches of the institute were to be run on a commercial scale with a view to giving employment to some of its trainees, and to their becoming economically self-sufficient.

The Sriniketan team was truly one of the international cooperations—Elmhirst, Pearson and Andrews from England; Kim Taro Kasahara, woodwork expert from Japan; nurse Gretchen Green from USA followed later by Dr. Harry Timbres and many years later, Miss Jeanson from Sweden who came as a weaving instructor; and from USA Dorothy Straight. The activities of Sriniketan for the above aims

and objectives were conducted by four departments: **agriculture, industries, village welfare** and **education** with some flexibility in the area of operations till 1941 after which there were some changes.

Agricultural activities in Sriniketan included ‘farming, vegetable gardening, orchards, dairy and poultry with the later addition of sericulture and fishery. Soil depletion and erosion were a major problem of the area, and the methods such as crop rotation and use of organic fertilizer were introduced to the villagers through demonstrations and experiments on the Surul farm. Kasahara carried on successful experiments in the orchard and encouraged families to grow fruits and vegetables in their own courtyards. In attempting to forest the area and introduce new crops, the Sriniketan nursery provided seedlings and grafts for fruit trees at subsidized cost. The dairy section took charge of supplying milk for the institution, as well as carrying out breeding experiments and research on fodder production. ... A sericulture farm for the production of raw silk was opened in conjunction with the government of Bengal agricultural department with the object of establishing sericulture as a village industry’.¹⁸

The revival of the cottage **industries** and crafts of the area was a major objective of Sriniketan through the Silpa Bhavana. Income from agriculture especially in a one-crop area (there was practically no irrigation other than the monsoon), like Birbhum, was understandably poor, and experts had felt that other means of income or livelihood were necessary. Also, the machine was overtaking hand-crafted items and artisans were forced to abandon their crafts and migrate to urban centres as labour. The challenge was to reinvigorate the crafts and small industries and to design objects that would compete with machine-made items in terms of design and novelty—this was the first expressions of ‘beautility’! Along with the old crafts, some new ones were introduced. The crafts that were brought under the ambit of Sriniketan at one time or the other were weaving, tannery, leather-craft, carpentry, lacquer work, pottery, tile-making, cane-work, bookbinding, tailoring, and embroidery (called *kantha* usually executed with running stitch). With the installation of the dynamo in 1929 the mechanical workshop could be made functional and practical courses in carpentry, smithy, lathe work, polishing, grinding, fitting, etc., were organized. The Swedish sloyd system of handicraft was introduced in weaving in 1932. Apprentices were trained here who later were able to earn their livelihood from their crafts with the training they had received in Sriniketan. The products of Sriniketan became known for their design and quality. In spite of the fact that the commercial aspect was subordinate to the educational goals, the Silpa Bhavana ‘was found to be one of the best paying sections’.¹⁹

The aim of the **village and welfare department** was twofold: to render all possible service to the villagers to solve their problems particularly to generate in them the spirit of self-help which would lead them to solve these problems through their own cooperative efforts. The department also served as the

¹⁸ Kathleen M. O’Connell, op. cit., p. 290.

¹⁹ P. C. Lal, *Reconstruction and Education in Rural India*, 1932, p. 124.

chief arm of extension by which the experience and findings of the various other departments were carried to the neighbouring villages for practical utilization on the one hand and on the other brought the problems of the villages to the various departments for discussion and solution. Thus, this department occupied a key position in the institute. Some of its other activities were rural survey and economic research through direct data collection as the need to learn before providing service was the golden rule. Tagore had repeatedly stressed the danger of inexpert service. Even as early as the Selaidaha days, he had surveys of the villages conducted in order to assess the standard of living, the economics of paddy cultivation, marketing of rice, etc. and thus deduce what help was necessary. Improvements in the agricultural pursuits and the industries were constantly being made as these were considered as fundamental to village economics. The results of the experience and findings were carried to the villages so that better methods of farming and useful industrial pursuits could be developed.

The other work was on **education** that included primary education for rural children through a number of night schools and a day school for girls. By 1940, there were almost 16 night schools with over 450 students while about 30 odd girl students were enrolled in the girls' school. The syllabus included the three R's, some useful crafts and some recreational activities; the girls were taught house-craft and gardening. Adult men and women also attended the night schools. There was a rural circulating library; lantern lectures and conferences as well as traditional readings and recitations from the epics and scriptures, *kirtans* (devotional singing) and performance of *jatras* or folk plays were arranged. The department of sanitation and health aimed at improving hygiene, nutrition and management of recurring diseases like malaria as already mentioned above. The jungles and bushes were cleared, the drains were cleaned and dug and medical services were organized. Dr. Harry Timbre gave a great impetus to the health initiative on his arrival in 1932; there were three health cooperatives that had been set up following the experience of such organizations in Yugoslavia. Trained midwives were attached to the medical centres. The women of each village were grouped together in a 'Mahila Samiti', and there were experts in needle work who would train women in tailoring and there were some teachers who trained women in tending their kitchen gardens so that they were able to provide nutritious food to their families.

In 1930, when Tagore visited Russia, he was greatly impressed with the giant cooperatives and he wrote, 'In our country, in every village, let the cooperative principle prevail in producing and distributing wealth... I believe that the village will succeed in rescuing its manifold power from the sinking state only through the method of cooperation'.²⁰ Apart from the health cooperatives mentioned above, many cooperative societies were formed—Weavers' Societies; Anti-malaria Societies, Irrigation Societies, Cooperative Stores, *Dharma-golas* (Cooperative Paddy-storing Societies), etc. During disasters such as floods or draughts, the department organized relief work; the department also organized entertainment

²⁰ RNT, *Russia-r Chithi*, 1931, RR, Volume 10, 1989.

and other amusements for the villagers on various occasions with cultural events and traditional performances.

Tree planting was a very popular and well-loved programme in the villages in which the youth of the village participated. From the very first year of Sriniketan, the youth of villages were targeted as the vehicles of change and it was found necessary to organize them. With the help of Elmhirst, the idea of boys' and girls' troops on the line of the Scout movement was given shape, and *Brati Balak* and *Brati Balika* troops were formed with boys and girls, respectively. The Scout movement was adapted to Indian village conditions and needs. The troops thus formed became active in various works and tasks—one of their special duties was crowd management during the annual winter fair or Pous Mela in Santiniketan as well as in mobilizing medical aid and cleaning of jungles and digging of drains. Joining the troops meant taking part in physical activities and exercise and these led the young to keep themselves clean and healthy; appear smart and alert, be disciplined and take on leadership roles. The scouts received help and cooperation from every department in Sriniketan as a result of which they were trained in some crafts and gardening that was to their advantage. In the villages around Sriniketan, there are some old Bratis who still continue to do something useful for the community they live in.

Tagore wrote, 'It is well known that the education which is prevalent in our country is extremely meagre in the spread of its area and barren in its quality. Outside of the *bhadralok* class ... there is a vast, obscure multitude who cannot even dream... with them we have our best opportunity if we know how to use it ... I have generally noticed that when the charity-minded, city-bred ... talk of education for the village folk, they mean a little left-over in the bottom of their cup, after diluting it copiously... unmindful of the fact that the kind and amount of food ... needful for mental nourishment, must not be apportioned ... according to the social status of those that receive it'.²¹ Siksha Satra or the school from where free education was imparted was an answer to this kind of attitude towards the rural people. This school set-up in 1924 under the leadership of Elmhirst started with six destitute village boys so that they would be provided the education by which they would come to be of use in their villages by becoming enlightened leaders and take responsibility of the various village welfare works. There was a distinct influence of Elmhirst's teachers, Dewey and Kilpatrick²² in the syllabus and methods of teaching followed in the school. Elmhirst was joined for a while by Arthur Geddes,²³ son of Patrick Geddes, who played a role in giving the school a definite leaning towards 'learning by doing' and the project method or activity-centred education. The subjects were given a different orientation from that followed in conventional schools—and to quote Elmhirst, 'Geology becomes the study of the fertility of the plot; Chemistry, the use of lime and manures of all kinds, of sprays and disinfectants; Physics, the use of tools, pumps, the study of

²¹ RNT letter to Elmhirst, 19 December 1937 cited in Satyendranath Ray (ed.) *Rabindranather Chinta Jagat: Siksha Chinta*, 1982, pp. 324–325.

²² For details on Dewey and Kilpatrick see Chap. IV.

²³ Bashabi Fraser (ed.), *A Meeting of Two Minds: Geddes Tagore Letters*, 2005.

water-lifts and oil-engines; Entomology, the control of plant pests and diseases; Ornithology, the study of birds in their relation first to the garden plot and then to the world in general'.²⁴ The achievements of the students of Siksha Satra in a matter of two years was remarkable, 'The gain of the boys in height, weight and strength has been very remarkable. The boys have made considerable progress in gardening, weaving and construction; they cut and sew and make their own garments, their own tables and boxes, can cook well, as well as paint, write a neat hand in Bengali, recite poems, know addition, multiplication, subtraction and division, not mechanically but in relation to life situations'.²⁵ Sriniketan started in 1937 a Primary Teachers' Training Institute named Siksha Charcha following the prescribed curriculum of the Government of Bengal with certain touches of its own such as instruction in music, agriculture, hygiene and sanitation, scouting, principles of rural reconstruction and allied subjects. Certainly this was not paralleled in any other training institution.

One of the most innovative plans for mass education was conceived by Tagore under the name of the Loka Siksha Samsad. This was a plan to educate those people who were not able to avail of the usual means of education but was interested in being educated. In order for this scheme to materialize it was planned to start centres for both home study and examination at three levels: matriculation, intermediate and undergraduate and the syllabus included Bengali language and literature; history; geography; arithmetic; general knowledge, elementary Hindi, hygiene and science in different combinations for different standards. Books for the subjects from the lowest to the highest standard were prescribed; also, some reading materials were prepared. Visva-Bharati undertook the publication of a series of books under the title of Loka Siksha Granthamala on various subjects of scientific and general interest written in easy language for the general public. This was modelled on the lines of the Home University Library. Records of the past 20 years up to 1957 of the Loka Siksha Sansad indicate that 'a total number of 14,686 private students registered as candidates for its various examinations out of whom 9,152 actually appeared and 5,689 passed. In 1957, 410 centres were recorded as registered under the society, of which about 300 were regarded by its workers as functioning more or less effectively...'.²⁶

5.3 Today and Tomorrow

The scheme for mass education that started in 1937 continuing till 1957 could not sustain itself beyond that. That it ran for 20 years was no less surprising. Many changes occurred after Tagore passed away in 1941; primarily, funds were not so forthcoming, and India was going through a turbulent period of freeing itself from

²⁴ L. K. Elmhirst, *Visva-Bharati Bulletin*, No. 9, July 1946, p. 21.

²⁵ Report of Santosh Chandra Mazumdar, in-charge Siksha Satra, cited in Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindra Jibani*, Volume 4, 2009, p. 119.

²⁶ H. B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, 2013, pp. 227–228.

the yoke of foreign rule and transiting to self-rule which it achieved with its independence in 1947. In 1951, Visva-Bharati became recognized as a Central University by an act of Parliament, and later, the institution came under the purview of the University Grants Commission established in 1958. The rule of averages and uniformity applied itself, and every effort was made on the part of the government body and on the part of the then management of the University to bring Visva-Bharati at 'par' with other universities as much as possible and as quickly as possible. The programmes of rural reconstruction suffered the most, though the then Vice-Chancellor, Rathindranath Tagore, the poet's son, had made valiant efforts to keep alive the works undertaken earlier. He and his wife, Pratima, made spirited efforts to continue their work to keep alive the industries department in the area of crafts by many innovations in design and the creation of products; especially noteworthy were leather-craft, batik, bookbinding, lacquer work, needlework, pottery and furniture. Funds were generated through sale of the products. Some follow-up studies available of those times of the economic condition of villages clearly showed a noticeable improvement in lifestyle and in standard of living as well as in education. The studies also indicated that some democratic systems were in operation reflecting Tagore's mission of rural rejuvenation.²⁷

One of the most comprehensive accounts of Sriniketan post-1941 and later 1951 is available from the work of Sudhir Sen who succeeded to the post of Director, Sriniketan, in 1939.²⁸ He was witness to the already-stultified state of work at Sriniketan due to lack of funds and proper manpower. After the poet's death in 1941, his son, Rathindranath, despite his efforts had to take on the reins of Visva-Bharati and had his hands full with keeping alive the education programme at Santiniketan. Elmhirst's four years in Sriniketan had not been enough to deal with all the problems of rural neighbourhood of Visva-Bharati.

At the present moment, Sriniketan is made up of a cluster of Institutes/Bhavanas and Centres engaged in tackling the different aspects of rural rejuvenation and reconstruction in keeping with their individual disciplinary orientation effecting an integrated and multi-pronged approach. It may be said that physically, the Sriniketan Experiment is housed in Sriniketan while spiritually, it is spread in the 40–50 villages surrounding the campus. The Institutes are the following: Institute of Rural Reconstruction or the Palli Samgathana Vibhaga under which there are the Department of Social Work; the Department of Rural Development (Palli Charcha Kendra); and the Department of Craft and Design or Silpa Sadana. The Rural Extension Centre includes the Centre for Lifelong Education. The Institute of Agriculture (Palli Siksha Bhavana) includes the departments of Agronomy, Soil Science, Agricultural Engineering, Plant Physiology and Animal Science (ASEPAN); Crop Improvement, Horticulture and Agricultural Botany (CIHAB); Plant Protection, Agricultural Entomology and Plant Pathology (PP); and Agricultural Extension, Economy and Statistics (EES). The academic support units are Dairy and Poultry Farms, Soil Testing Laboratory and Rathindra Krishi Vijnan Kendra (named after Tagore's son Rathindranath).

²⁷ Sugata Dasgupta, *A Poet and a Plan*, 1962, Calcutta, pp. 112–113.

²⁸ Sudhir Sen, *op. cit.*,

Siksha Satra, the school as mentioned above, is situated in Sriniketan; today, it is the counterpart of the Patha Bhavana, the original school constituting the core asrama at Santiniketan. The school, Siksha Satra, has a kindergarten section called the Santosh Pathsala. The original plan of the school has undergone a sea change. However, Sriniketan in general maintains a balance between academic activities and extension. Thus, the syllabus offered in the various departments and institutes of Sriniketan combine course curriculum that is underpinned with exposure of students, faculty and support staff to rural situations, communities and local governance with a view to interface, interaction and exchange as we can gauge from the description of the departments and institutes above.

Once a university launches a regular teaching programme, there is a change in focus from doing to learning—the emphasis shifts to theoretical teaching with the field becoming the supporter/validator of theory. The process of learning seems to become prioritized and effecting change in the village conditions becomes secondary. As a result of this, possibility of piecemeal measures being adopted proves somewhat ineffective in bringing about change in villages. The solutions for many of the village problems lie more in coordination, cooperation and integration of efforts that are possible to be lost in the zeal to train students in particular intervention skills and strategies. In other words, the village becomes hypothesized.²⁹ What is overlooked is that a web of interconnectedness and dependence underlined by a sense of continuity exists in the causation of human conditions.

The country was even more rural in composition than what it is today or has been since independence. Since independence, there has been unprecedented urbanization and the very nature of villages has changed or they are in the processes of change. The aspirations of villagers, the economy that they pursued, the intergenerational gap expressed in cultural practices and values, the attitudes towards polity/governance, all have been palpably transformed and in many instances eroded the relatively 'stable' base of rural community life. The sociological and historical instruments that we so readily use and apply today to nation building, such as polity as a social institution, citizenship,³⁰ constitutional rights, national economy, education policy, social justice, human rights, were not so universally applicable then or perceived in quite

²⁹ My experience of teaching in the department of Social Work situated in Sriniketan for the past 34 years has made me conscious of the transformation from *doing* to *learning*. As an academic department, it is in the interest of the students to equip them in every way so that they have the skills to handle any kind of situation in places not necessarily the local areas for which reason the problems of the village are not contextualized in the immediate environs but are often 'seen' in a larger context, thereby somewhat losing out on solutions. For more details, see Sherry Joseph and Prasanta Ghosh, *Sriniketan: From Experiment to Experience*, 2002.

³⁰ Andre Beteille, (2011), 'Caste and the Citizen', in *Science and Culture*, Volume 77, No. 3–4, March–April 2011, p. 84. It is posited that the distinction in the representation of Indian society highlights the crucial difference in the approach to Rural Reconstruction then and now as, "... two representations of society ... in contemporary India. The first is the representation of India as a society of castes and communities and the second its representation as a nation of citizens. The first had its roots in immemorial tradition... The second is of more recent provenance and derives its legitimacy from the Constitution of India... it was the group and not the individual that counted in the traditional social order."

the same way. In other words, our perception of contemporary needs, aspirations, opportunities, expectations, demands, sense of identity (intertwined with political, regional, religious, linguistic, caste, class, besides scheduled categories of castes and tribes) and sense of individual agency and capacity to negotiate sociopolitical situations, are incomparable on more grounds than ever before.

The questions then arise—what is the situation now and what are the factors that have changed our activities? I would like to compare the work that used to be performed then against the work that is done now in order to address the fundamental issues involved:

- Since the institutionalization of the Five-year Plans agriculture and related activities are looked after by government bodies such as the Block Development; paddy is cultivated twice a year in many areas; multi-cropping is a norm and irrigation is through widespread government and limited private initiative.
- Village sanitation, drainage, village roads and other public facilities and services, etc. are the designated activities of the Panchayati Raj Institutions which earmark budgetary provisions for these works.
- Education, at least primary and high school education are matters of the State and there are Primary, Secondary and High School Boards which look after recruitment and training of teachers, syllabi, etc. of schools and admission criteria for students.
- Health too is a matter of State—midwife training, integrated child development programmes, immunization all have their own infrastructure and trained personnel.
- Livelihood training is looked after by the Block Offices through Panchayati tiers³¹; small, medium, large banking and industrial support systems are there to offer loans, expertise, etc. for entrepreneurship development.

The list can be extended so as to envelop most of the community life within the ambit of the State or its arms. These were some of the core areas of the Sriniketan Experiment as has been shown throughout this chapter; however, at present, the Institute of Rural Reconstruction through its Rural Extension Centre is not directly involved in these programmes as a direct service provider that it was to some extent in the past. Rather, it has now shifted to partnering with the Block Offices and other government arms of administration so that some of the above activities are monitored or overseen jointly with the State. From being a direct service provider, the university has taken on a role overseeing the implementation of the spirit rather than the letter of the government plans, policies, etc.

There is ample scope, however, for the university to create that space in partnership with the State within which the university is able to play a significant role in implementing the government's Five-year Plan Programmes as well as maintain

³¹ Institutions of local governance in the rural areas of India are referred to as Panchayats. The Constitution of India visualizes Panchayat as a 3-tier system of self-governance at the levels of the village, block and district. This is the largest experiment in formal decentralization of governance in the known history of humanity. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_self-government_in_India.

the core values of the poet. Rabindranath was very conscious of the limitations of Sriniketan's 'penetration' due to financial constraints, and this limited the accessibility of reaching large numbers of villages or people. In the light of this, the move to limit the work of Sriniketan to its present state seems judicious. However, Sriniketan is conscious of the fact that Rabindranath would not have wanted the unimaginativeness of the State's mechanized processes prescribing the same medicine for all and it is for this reason that Sriniketan has endeavoured to temper its activities with the guiding principles of more people-driven plans and activities. It has brought its activities and interests to bear more on the cultural and social aspects of development of the person and community life, the youth and women. It devolves upon Visva-Bharati to choose those aspects generally ignored by the State. The work of Sriniketan acquires significance because of its focus on the factors contributing to the development of the complete personality as envisaged through the Tagorean principle of education and extension of the self.

I shall sum up with a poem of Tagore's:

I live in a small corner in the perpetual exile of prestige, seated by a narrow window on society's high platform.

Sometimes I have ventured near their homes but have lacked the courage to enter

Come, poet of mute, obscure men, give voice to their hidden sorrow, fill with life and joy this dry, songless land, release the spring in its heart.³²

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³² RNT, 'Poet of Man', tr. Humayun Kabir, in Humayun Kabir (ed.) *Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 240.

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