

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

Rabindra Jayanti
Special

Santiniketan : A Winter of Contentment

by Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

But the days are gone, irretrievably lost, as the old ashramiks will tell you, with a half-repressed sign perhaps. There is a day in Santiniketan calendar, a day of remembrance of the dead ashramiks/residents. It starts with a memorial service. Time is early morning, and venue, the Amra Kunja, the mango grove. I hope I am right here.



Photo: Courtesy-DESH

THIS was the winter of 1984-85. A few months earlier, Professor Amlan Datta, Vice-Chancellor of Visva-Bharati had written to ask if I would like to spend a term of visiting professorship at Santiniketan. I replied to say that, as far as I was concerned, the offer was more than welcome. If those were not the exact words I wrote, that was exactly my sentiment. I was about to complete my second term of vice-chancellorship. Full eight years of university administration, under the circumstances in Bangladesh, left me ready to accept any assignment of a purely academic nature outside the country. Santiniketan meant an abode of peace. And peace was what my heart yearned after.

I had been to Santiniketan before this. It was so short a visit, half a day and a night, that it left me only eager for a longer visit, and a more relaxed one. The university's offer could not be bettered, both in terms of the timing and of terms.

About the timing I have already said something. I only wish to add that though Professor Datta wanted me to be there in July, I postponed it till November. I didn't fancy being there in summer, and winter held many temptations, the famed Poush Mela being one of them.

The day I was to have taken the train for Santiniketan, Indira Gandhi was killed.

Suddenly, in Calcutta, mid-night descended in broad daylight. There was no train for anywhere. I left the following day, a lone passenger in my compartment. At Bolepur railway station, there was no body to receive me because there was no message. A rickshaw ride to Santiniketan was a good introduction to the tenor of life waiting for me for the next three months.

Now about the terms. The Vice-Chancellor's letter had explained what was expected of a visiting professor. He would be formally attached to one of the several Bhabans and the choice would be his. He would prepare his own programme of work during his stay at the university which would impose no requirement on its part. The whole idea was to give, as also to receive from, the academic community whatever one was capable of giving and receiving. Professor

but I missed the writer-in-residence. Sankha Ghose, well-known as a poet and critic was holding the position that year but because of illness, he had left Santiniketan soon after he had arrived.

We were three of us in that complex of rooms, Panchabati, — five units in all, as the name suggests. Each unit consisted of a bed-sitter and a dining room with cooking facilities. It was enough for a single person but not good enough for a couple. One of my neighbours was a Russian, who taught the language. The other was an Italian, and he had interests going beyond language. Both had come much earlier and were going to remain much longer and both had their regular teaching assignment. I stood on an entirely different ground. We were good neighbours, that was all.

On arrival, I was received by

didn't feel comfortable with the proposal as I was out of touch with this area but I nodded with this consent. It was an easy way of earning their, more particularly the students' gratitude.

On my first day, or maybe within the next few days, Dr Naresh Guha — I will call him simply Naresh henceforward — took me out and showed me round the complex of houses that Rabindranath had built for himself over the years. This is usually interpreted as one more expression of the poet's restless spirit. Naresh felt it his duty to find a suitable room for me and he made a very special offer, a room in the house last occupied by the poet. He assured me that it was the first offer of its kind but I politely declined. I should be too much isolated. Also the room was dusty because it had not been in regular use. So I chose a quiet corner for me on

message to Nehru, and Nehru found this solution. The university has since then been under the direct care of the central government and as one of the five or six central universities, it receives more grants than an average Indian university does. In academic terms, however, I thought Visva-Bharati suffered because of its geographical situation and its rural setting, which, in its totality does not encourage the best students to come here. This deficiency is compensated by the fact that, as a place and as an institution, Santiniketan is larger than Visva-Bharati. As an academic concept, Santiniketan aims at offering the whole gamut of it, — primary through secondary to tertiary. No other university is so integrated with the two earlier phases of education, and this is the specialty of Santiniketan.

What I found much more of

created as Miss Sykes was reminiscing, as if we had gone back to the days of Rabindranath.

But the days are gone, irretrievably lost, as the old ashramiks will tell you, with a half-repressed sign perhaps. There is a day in Santiniketan calendar, a day of remembrance of the dead ashramiks/residents. It starts with a memorial service. Time is early morning, and venue, the Amra Kunja, the mango grove. I hope I am right here. In the meeting which I attended, the special guest or guest of honour was Professor Amiya Dasgupta, the well-known economist, who had taught at Dhaka University for many years, before he migrated to India. He spoke of his old university, in glowing terms. I later talked to him, thanking him for his digression which had pleased me as an old student of the place.

Next to Naresh whom I met almost every day, I valued the company in Santiniketan of Amlan Datta who was very good at finding occasions, or creating them, so that we could meet and talk. Amlan left after a couple of months and was succeeded by Prof Nimal Sadhan Bose, a historian. Prof

Bose presided over a function in which I read a paper on poetry in Bangladesh. For illustrating my point, I read verses from Shamsur Rahman, Al Mahmud and myself. At the end of my talk, Bose insisted that we have a session of poetry reading, entirely devoted to my poetry, and the sole reciter being myself. I was flabbergasted, but Naresh went ahead and arranged it, at the suggestion of the Vice-Chancellor, in his own drawing room, the V C's lounge being too small!

To my mind, that was the most glorious evening of my life. I am not a bad reciter. I read from my poems for over an hour, and the audience was large enough to fill up the room. I have many fond memories of Santiniketan, the very exclusive Wednesday morning Albola meeting of elders — membership being restricted to men over sixty, — the evenings at Aravinda Nilay, the Ekushey celebrations at Sangeet Bhaban, the inspired performance of maestro Santideb Ghose, his singing and his dancing, with a number of Bauls joining him; the evenings of warm friendship in Sibnarayan Ray's house, RUDRAPALASH, to mention just a few. My Calcutta class, my hours in the library, formed the routine part of my life. But the moments I remember most and I cherish most were outside this routine. Santiniketan impressed me preeminently as a place of leisureed pursuit of culture, a place of repose, of memory. It was a good place for people with a long past, perhaps not so good a place who have along future.

A JOURNEY TO WHERE THE MEMORIES ARE

by Chanchal Sarkar

NO time machine can whisk us back to 1892, the year in which the present Tagore Kuthibari in Shilaidah was built; the old one, an indigo planter's bungalow, had been claimed by the Padma. The 18-room, three-storied mansion with its wavy boundary wall and set on 30 bighas of land, rang then with song, children's laughter and the eager arguments of those drawn to that remote but beautiful place by the almost

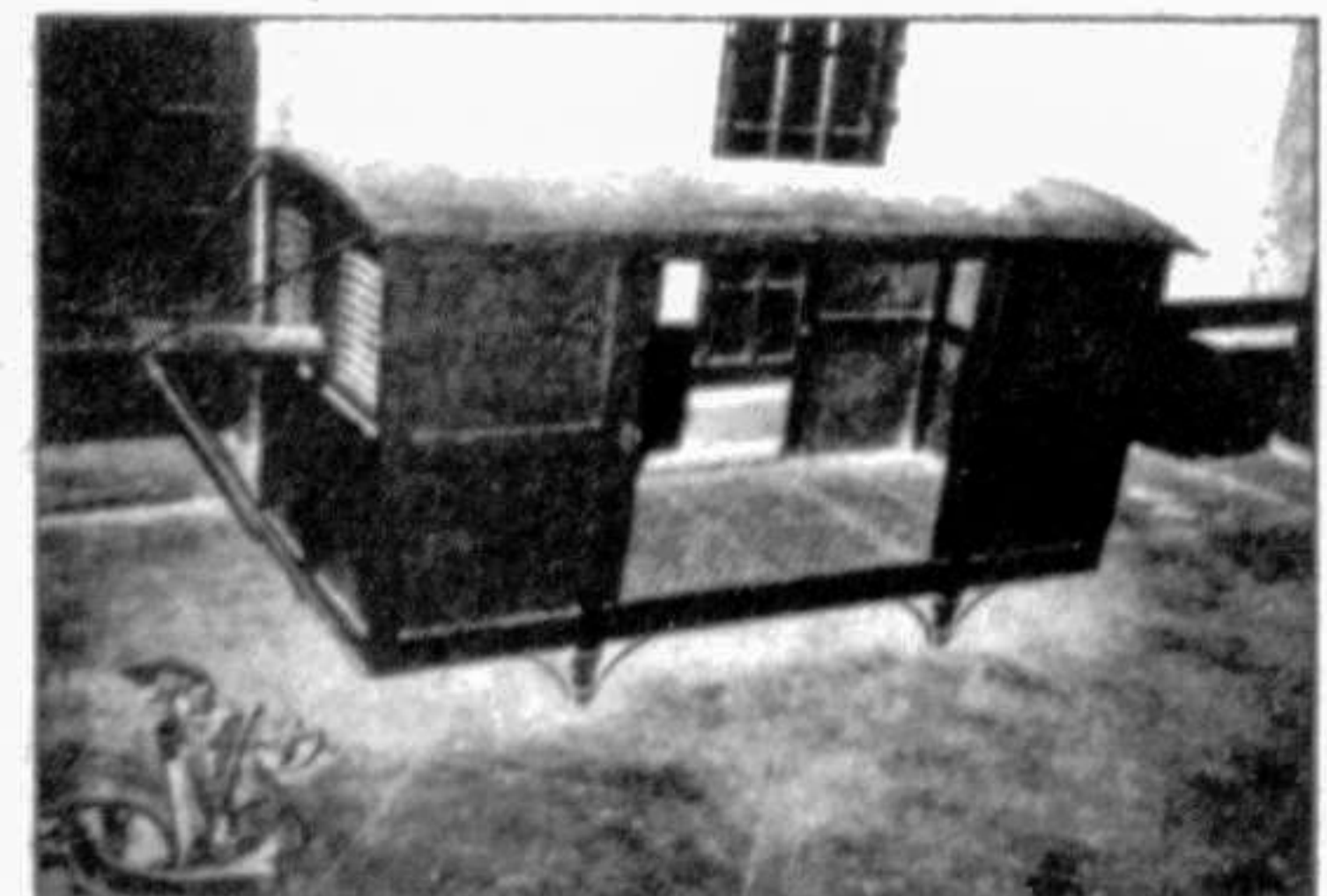
But the visit was an inner experience, an affirmation of faith, an expression of gratitude for so much received, and a touching of base. Could the old house be made more attractive and meaningful? I think so. The East Pakistan Government took over the Kuthibari in 1961, and, of course, successive Bangladesh Governments have not wavered in their concern. The Kuthibari is adequately looked after. Its staff of thirteen —

motor boat, the palanquins, the wide bed and the tables and couches must not be exposed to the touching and testing of the curious and the name scratchers.

Once restored, the rooms should be visible but not open to entering. There should be picture post-cards, cassettes, records and books for sale and short, simply written guide notes for visitors especially from age groups or educational levels not likely to know much about Rabindranath Tagore and his ideas. There is no need to have a Tagore Industry as Salzburg has its Mozart Industry, but people must know what they are seeing.

The Kuthibari simply cannot cope with the invasion of students and others descending in hundreds. The numbers allowed in at a time must be controlled. A small entry fee might make for greater responsibility and also bring in some income to be ploughed back. And around the Kuthibari there must grow a small complex where, sometimes in the open air and sometimes inside, people can talk, meet, discuss and make music. Besides, the concept should also, perhaps, stretch out to the Kuthibari at Shajapur.

Should all this be left to the government? That would be a great admission of failure. The Deputy Commissioner of Kushtia, Mr Hafiz Ahmed, is a nice, courteous man, eager to do what he can. But he has a lot on his plate, the Kuthibari proper is under the Department of Archaeology, the Rest House is the Zila Parishad's responsibility while the roads are Mr Ahmed's. And so there is the eternal crisis of coordination that mars our sub-continent. It is for the people who hold Rabindranath Tagore as the symbol of the Bengali identity to organise the refurbishing of the Kuthibari to be an instrument of that identity.



Tagore's palanquin

Photo: N Halder

limitless creative energy of one man. At other times the Kuthibari was profoundly quiet when that one man, his zamindari administration work easily disposed of, sat at his table from which he could see both the Padma and the Goral and wrote for hours on end or kept endless assignations with his beloved, turbulent, sea-wide Padma, turning over in his mind words of new songs and setting them to tune.

We didn't travel in his long, twelve-bearer palanquin with its cane bottom, nor in a barge down the Goral. Instead, we were in a four-wheel-drive hard-top jeep. Though a parched Goral makes its crossing feasible and there is a road beyond, we journeyed and bounced past six miles of villages and fields. After a hundred years, I wonder if what we saw along the way was very different from what the poet would have seen from his palanquin or barge. Old men with grizzled spade beards and skull caps. Women who worked over so much harder than men, looked curiously at us, visitors from another world as we zoomed past in air-conditioned aloofness, the children were not shy at all but too slender and the cows, patient but much too small and bony to do much pulling. The Padma has, of course, moved away and is a silver streak somewhat short of the horizon. This the poet would have found distressing, as did we.



One of the tables used by Tagore

Photo: N Halder

to 'take in' while looking for a noisy romp. It cannot be just another distinctive building that is holding up well after a hundred years. The Kuthibari could be made much more interesting. The rooms could be furnished exactly as they once had been. If the original pieces are not traceable or beyond repair then copies could be made. What remains of the original things like the long

ment of Archaeology, the Rest House is the Zila Parishad's responsibility while the roads are Mr Ahmed's. And so there is the eternal crisis of coordination that mars our sub-continent. It is for the people who hold Rabindranath Tagore as the symbol of the Bengali identity to organise the refurbishing of the Kuthibari to be an instrument of that identity.



Tagore in the children's section of Viswabharati

Photo: Courtesy-DESH

Datta must have put it in a more urbane language, and I am not quoting him verbatim, but I believe I have conveyed the essence of the idea.

And need I say that it was a most civilized idea, well understood and practised in many universities of Europe and America. Rabindranath, being a supremely civilized man, had a full understanding of the idea which, unfortunately, many of us in the universities are too dense to appreciate. India, being somewhat more civilized than ourselves, has a University Grants Commission that can sponsor ideas commensurate with universities. The visiting professorship was one of them. Incidentally, Visva-Bharati has another concept which it shares with some distinguished American universities, — the concept of a writer and an artist-in-residence. During my stay, I was able to spend a long evening with the artist-in-residence,

my good friend, Dr Naresh Guha who had retired from Jadavpur University and had come over to Visva-Bharati as the Director of Rabindra Bhaban. Without a moment's hesitation, I got myself attached to Rabindra Bhaban. The English Department possibly took note of this and didn't object but quietly they sent a proposal through their emissaries, three or four students. There was a remarkably good-looking young lady in the group whom I later found to be a Tagore.

They have a coffee break around ten in the morning. At least, in the English Department, that was the arrangement. The proposal came from the teachers over my first cup of coffee with them. This was their common room, and here they assembled at ten when there was a half an hour's recess. The Department was badly in need of a teacher to do the Chaucer texts for the M A class. Could I? would I? I



Tagore meditating at "Chhatimtala" of Santiniketan

Photo: Courtesy-DESH

the first floor of Rabindra Bhaban which housed the library. It was quiet but it had a short smell of the chemical they used to keep off insects and save the books. Still I was happy because I wanted to be near the books.

My time was divided between this corner and another corner that they had found for me in the Central Library. The stacks of this Central Library were in a mess but I was used to this sort of disarray back at home.

Did I find a vigorous intellectual life at Santiniketan? No. Visva-Bharati, as a Central Government university was well off financially. This status it owed to the initiative of Pandit Nehru, with his great admiration for the poet who had left a request to Mahatma Gandhi to see that Visva-Bharati survived after the poet's death. Story goes that Gandhi passed on the

a compensation was the other dimensions of Santiniketan, viz. social and cultural. People, especially foreign visitors in India, usually do not fail to pay a visit to Santiniketan, a name which has still kept a magic about it. All this is because of Rabindranath. During my stay, one of these visitors was Miss Margery Sykes. Long ago, as a fresh graduate from Cambridge, she had come here, and had taught English Literature. Then she had left, and moved to other parts of India, and became a social worker as a follower of Gandhi's ideal of service. She was old now. They had arranged a special meeting for her, in which she gave a talk on her association with two great men, Rabindranath and Gandhi. Both speaker and listeners squatted on the floor, Santiniketan style. The audience consisted mostly of old ashramiks, and an illusion was

BILKIS + Masud Rana, Monohori, Shirin + Masum, Feni, Zia + Afroza. These are some of the specimens of scribbling done on, of all the places in the wide world, the wall-board on which Rabindranath's paintings are on display at Shilaidah Kuthibari. The name-scribers' sole motive may not be willful vandalism — for their tender age and romantic preoccupation may have been too inconsiderate and too overriding to resist the momentary impulse — but to a Tagore lover or for that matter art lover, it is vandalism all the same.

What is still more worrisome is the fact that the staff, numbering 12 altogether, responsible for the on-the-spot maintenance of the 18-room mansion know no better way of protecting the work of Tagore and the goods and furniture used by him during his most fruitful stay in nature's lap in Purbabanga than they are doing now through merely mild appeal mixed with fear of drawing wrath from the invading vandals.

It is this fear that would not allow the display of words except on special occasions — such as the 25th Baishakh, Rabindranath's birth day. Throughout the year, therefore, they are kept under lock and key and the visitors are deprived of a rare treat, made so because of their association with the saint-like poet. Maybe that way those weapons are better kept but hardly given the historic treatment they deserve.

In Love with Kuthibari

by Nilratan Halder

However much pleased, if not complacent, Shamsul Islam, Director, Department of Archaeology may sound in making the assertion about the maintenance of once-living place of Tagore, there are still enough scope for both preservation of the things that have so far survived the gnawing

jaws of time and implementation of some ideas necessary for stalling the decaying process.

For example, the furniture used at Tagore's time could be left alone instead of placing them for anyone's sitting and feeling of the touch. If people continue to use them, their

days without doubt will be numbered soon. Those no more allowed to be so roughly used are also not in good health either. One cannot help feeling pity for the famous couch of Tagore when one sets one's eyes on it. Under cover of a torn polythene paper, the couch — itself broken — in-

deed cuts a sorry figure. Sure enough, the palanquins — one used to be borne by 12 bearers and the other 16 bearers — are in a good stead, so are the oval table and the writing table but they will not take long to follow suit, for exposed to the elements such an inevitability for them is much too natural. The jet black chairs on which the poet sat and wrote have started showing signs of wears and tears.

Built by the poet's grandfather Dwaraka Nath Tagore in 1892 in place of the mansion which was bought in 1913, this Kuthibari is 100 years old — old but not rickety as yet. But some of the wood and iron works such as the hanging porch or verandah (wood) upstairs and the spiralling nicely designed staircase (iron) appear to have outlived their normal service period. They are put under abnormal stress particularly by picnic crowd whose flow cannot be controlled by the appeals of the guards or guides.

The Kuthibari with its tree lines and open spaces all around complemented by the sandy spacious stretch of the bank of the Padma nearer offers a magnificent picnic spot for the picnicers. And the picnicers hardly miss the chance of using the natural facilities along with those offered by the local administration in the shape of a rest house adjacent to the Kuthibari. But use they must those facilities, no complaint about that. What is however disgusting is the inconsiderate



The Kuthibari at Shilaidah

Photo by the writer.

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