One Off

In a Different World

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Here in Shantiniketan things are not quite as I thought they would be. I had drawn a picture of the place in my mind out of a long held perception. I have been here thrice, the last time being in 1995. It was the month of December, beastly cold and dry. The hotel we checked in was horrible. But that did not really matter. We arrived at about nine in the evening and, after a frugal meal, went to bed. Incidentally, I do not remember much of my two earlier visits in 1971 and '74. So my impression of Shantiniketan being a dream place must have been a perception held over years and nurtured by my readings and other exposé about the place. Rabindranath and Shantiniketan to me are indivisible. On the following morning of December 22nd, 1995, when we went out to see Shantiniketan I was taken by unpleasant surprise. It was not quite what I had pictured in my mind's eye. The images that were conjured up from my readings of Rabindranath and descriptions given by many of my older friends who were in love with the place, were shattered. I thought during my visit of '95 that 'time' must have taken its toll on this most venerated bastion of art and culture. But what seemed unacceptable is why should time be allowed to tamper with a place as consecrated as this?

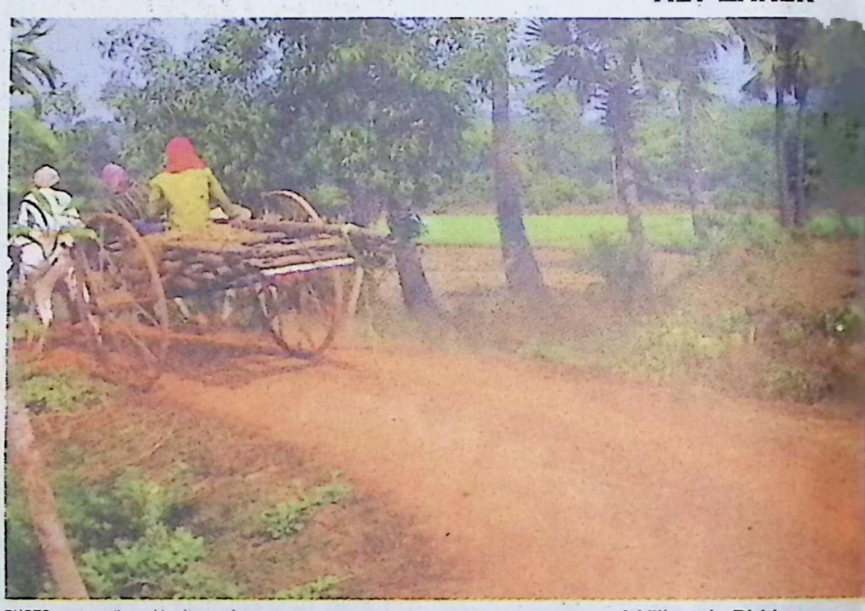


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A Village in Birbhum.

That Rabindranath's vision was not to be fiddled with was universally acknowledged. But, in 1995, we found very little of Rabindranath here. However our visit to the village of the Shao(n)tals famously known as "Shao(n)tal Palli" restored some hope about the glory that seemed naturally associated with this hallowed place left us with a feeling of fulfilment. We went into some huts that were extraordinarily beautiful. But that was not all what Shantiniketan held for me for years. It was a philosophy that I had drawn my inspiration from a comparatively early age that that made me look forward to coming here. And so I did. I must confess that at the end of it all, despite some mundane discomforts, I left the place with a sense of contentment.

This time on I came to Shantiniketan as my wife Sara's retinue. She was coming here to participate in a seminar and I tagged along. I thought, while preparing for this visit that even if I found Shantiniketan wanting in any way I would not complain. I had decided to go there and I would go there. I would try to imagine that I was there in its golden days. We rented a car that would take us from Kolkata to Shantiniketan and back. We started one fine morning from our hotel in Kolkata, crossed the Hooghly River over the Vidya Sagar Bridge and hit the Grand Trunk Road. I had read and heard a lot about this historic road as a school student and had an image built in my mind about it but never had an opportunity to see this