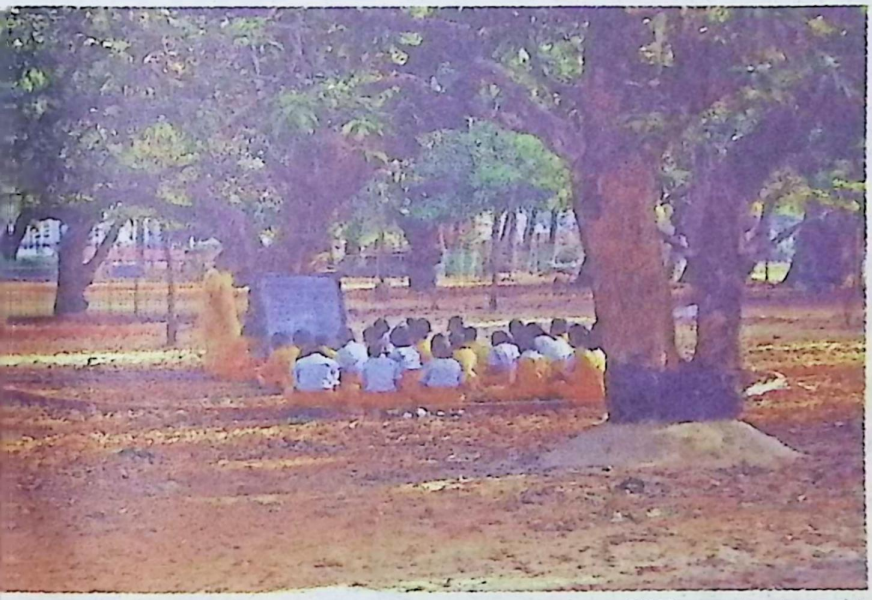
piece of history with my own eyes. This was the road initiated by Sher Shah Suri, the Pathan Emperor of India. He introduced mail on horse back through this road travelling from Bengal to Delhi and beyond. He built inns along the road so that travellers could rest, refresh themselves and move on. This road saw a lot of significant pieces of history roll through it.

On way to Shantiniketan our driver decided to leave the GT road and take a link road, ostensibly, to cut short the distance. Though it transpired that this road was longer. Also the road, for most part, was not very good. But both Sara and I enjoyed the drive. Because this by-road provided us the opportunity to see the hinterland of Bardhaman and Birbhum. We had never seen the interior of West Bengal before except while travelling through it by inter-city trains. So this drive enabled us to soak in the typicality of village life that was way different from what we encounter in the villages of Bangladesh. These people were poor. Clearly much poorer than the villages of eastern Bangladesh. There was no razzmatazz of department stores, eateries or fruit and provision shops on either side of the narrow village roads as one would see in Bangladeshi villages. After covering about a couple of kilometres, a bazaar appeared from nowhere which was devoid of colour, with very small shops selling indigenous sweets, a laundry and a tiny grocery. The most common sight was the abundance of water buffalos which, we guessed, were used to pull carts heavily laden with various kinds of goods. Poverty also was distinctively seen in the clothes of people in these villages and the physique of men, women and children.

What, however, came as a very pleasant surprise was how the villagers, particularly women, moved around with enormous freedom and confidence. If you stopped somewhere for a cup of tea, and asked them something, they would look you in the eye and answer back without fumbling or shyness. They also seemed, as it transpired through short conversations, to be sure of themselves. These village roads were devoid of heavy or light vehicular traffic. You would come across a bus that we called 'Murir Tin' in the good old days, full with passengers. There were a couple of rickshaws here and there. But the roads were full of bicycles. What impressed us most is the fact that most women travelling a distance on these roads were riding bicycles. They could be of any age. We have seen teenagers, youths and old women also riding bicycles without any hindrance. Very often one would find courtyards full of men and women busy in animated conversations full of fervour. The children were busy, merrily playing indigenous games with rudimentary equipment. They seemed truly liberated. I thought to myself that it was true that these villages were devoid of affluence. But their freedom and happiness more than offset their economic condition. These were hard-working happy people who were content with the income they had if it was commensurate with the kind of labour that they put every day.



Shantiniketan

PHOTO: www.westbengal.tourism.gov.in

By contrast, it would be impossible to see women on our affluent village roads. Even if you did come across some, they would be fully covered and moving very hesitatingly from one place to the other. Our roads are full with all kinds of vehicles and people do not even bother to walk a short distance. Somehow I was tempted to conclude that there was a lack of life that one would usually associate with free thinking people.

As we came closer to Shantiniketan, the sun had descended to the Western horizon. Evening was fast approaching the abode of Rabindranath. All off a sudden I discovered that the gloom of inadequacy of my past visit to Shantiniketan seemed a distant past. All men, women and children gleefully assembled on the streets, in the courtyards and in the university areas. They seemed to be content with themselves and their freedom, which seem so dear in our societies. May be Kobi Gurus magic wand still works in this different world. ■