




REVISITING THE SANTINIKETAN AS A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: A STUDY IN CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Dr. Jagannath Mondal 

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

Assistant Professor in Geography,
Turku Hansda Lapsa Hemram
Mahavidyalay, Mallarpur, Birbhum,
West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Jagannath Mondal

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250303055>

Abstract

Santiniketan is examined in this study as a unique cultural landscape, emphasizing its importance in the field of cultural geography. Established by Debendranath Tagore in the 1860s, followed by Rabindranath Tagore in the early 1900s, Santiniketan is more than just an ashram; it is a living example of Tagore's philosophy, which combines education, culture, nature, and universal humanism. This paper re-examines Santiniketan as a spatial manifestation of cultural values, aesthetics, and socio-political ideas, drawing on theories of cultural geography. The study investigates how constructed forms, creative expressions and environmental components interact to create a distinct cultural milieu through archival research, spatial analysis, and interpretive frameworks. It also discusses the current situations this heritage site faces because of commercialization, modernization, and changes in cultural memory due to the diffusion process. In the end, the study presents Santiniketan as a vibrant cultural environment where identity and space combine to create a unique paradigm for place-making and cultural sustainability.

Keywords: *Cultural landscape, Cultural values, Creative expressions, Cultural memory, Cultural environment*

1. Introduction

Santiniketan, a cultural landscape intricately entwined with Rabindranath Tagore's vision, is more than just an educational institution. It is situated in West Bengal, India. Tagore's principles of harmony between mankind, nature, creativity, and education are embodied at Santiniketan, which was founded in the early 20th century as an alternative to the colonial educational system. It defies traditional divisions between the local and the global, the material and the spiritual, and the rural and the urban as a spatial manifestation of his philosophical, artistic, and educational objectives. The latest UNESCO World Heritage Site designation in 2023 has brought Santiniketan back into the public and scholarly spotlight. Its institutional or historical legacy, however, continues to receive most of the attention, with little attention paid to its geographical, cultural, and symbolic aspects from the perspective of cultural geography. Beyond physical space, cultural geography enables us to investigate the ways in which landscapes are created, experienced, and given meaning over time.

2. Selection and Importance of the Study

Santiniketan was chosen as the study's subject because of its distinctive status as a cultural landscape that exemplifies the interaction of nationalism, education, culture, and nature. There are various reasons why this study is significant. First, Santiniketan offers a comprehensive perspective on how human values influence and are influenced by location, making it a unique instance of the convergence of cultural geography, architectural design, and innovative education. Second, given the current worldwide discussions surrounding identity, sustainability, and cultural heritage preservation in the face of urbanization and the commercialization of cultural sites, a return to Santiniketan is particularly pertinent. Third, there is a revived interest among academics and the public in reassessing Santiniketan's spatial and cultural heritage because of its recent designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

This study adds to larger discussions on place-making, landscape interpretation, and the lasting impact of visionary cultural initiatives in forming regional and national identities by looking at Santiniketan through the perspective of cultural geography. It also aims to provide guidance for future conservation plans that preserve these distinctive cultural landscapes while honoring their original essence and changing purposes.

3. Research Objectives

The objectives of the present research are the followings:

- To analyze Santiniketan as a cultural landscape.
- To highlight the significant specialties of Santiniketan's culture.
- To examine the role of Visva-Bharati in the cultural dimensions of Santiniketan.
- To investigate the diffusion process of Santiniketan's culture.

4. Database and Methodology

The study's chosen methodologies determine the validity and dependability of any kind of research. Therefore, methodology is crucial in highlighting the main research findings. The study uses an interpretive and qualitative methodology grounded in cultural geography's conceptual tools. It focusses on comprehending the social construction, symbolic meaning, and historical layering of location. This study offers a comprehensive view of Santiniketan not just as a heritage site but as a living cultural landscape, one that is constantly changing while maintaining strong historical and philosophical roots by fusing empirical fieldwork with cultural interpretation. This methodology adds significant insights to academic research and heritage management practices, supporting the objective of connecting spatial analysis with cultural meaning.

To create a thorough grasp of Santiniketan's cultural landscape, the study combines primary and secondary data sources. Historical maps, architectural plans, Rabindranath Tagore's writings, and early documentation of the Visva-Bharati institution; on-site trips to Santiniketan to see the architectural elements, natural surroundings, and public utilization of spaces; existing studies on Santiniketan from fields including cultural studies, sociology, and architecture; Photographs and paintings depicting Santiniketan's terrain, among other things, have been created in order to gather pertinent information for research on the city's cultural landscape.

5. Santiniketan – the Cultural Landscape

Santiniketan is one of the richest cultural landscapes in Bengal. Carl O. Sauer (1925) was probably the most influential in promoting and developing the idea of cultural landscapes. Cultural Landscapes have been defined by the World Heritage Committee as “*distinct geographical areas or properties uniquely representing the combined work of nature and of man*” (Doukellis and Mendoni, 2004). The cultural landscape is the term used to describe those parts of the earth's surface that have been altered or created by humans. Cultural forces unique to a given place – such as religion, language, ethnicity, customs, or heritage, influence the cultural landscape of that place at a given time. The colours, sizes, and shapes of the cultural landscape usually symbolize some level of significance regarding societal norms. Spatial dynamics assist in identifying and evaluating cultural differences between places (Murdock, 1945; Chatterjee, 1967).

Primarily, Santiniketan was a beautiful physical landscape full of Khoai landscape on an undulating barren land surface. Generally, physical landscape is the term used to describe the natural terrain at any one place on the planet and the natural forces of erosion, weather, tectonic plate action, and water have formed the earth's physical features. But, the evolution of the unique education system and culture in Santiniketan made it an aesthetic cultural landscape (Thompson, 2000; Bandopadhyay, 2009).

6. The Role of Santiniketan as a Cultural Hearth

Cultural hearth delineates how original ideas are conceived of and scattered in a particular or broad region. Santiniketan was an essential cultural hearth to show the importance of well-equipped man-nature interface (Doukellis and Mendoni, 2004). Origin and spread of *Santiniketani Sanskriti* (culture of Santiniketan) in the places, within and outside of Santiniketan may be termed as ‘*Santiniketization*’ (for example, the term ‘Sanskritization’ was coined by M.N. Srinivas to describe a process of cultural mobility in the traditional social structure of India in his book ‘Religion and Society among the Coorgs in Southern India’ in 1952). *Santiniketization* (Process of making Santiniketan culture) is a unique example for the discussion of spatial dimension. It is generally thought that Santiniketan evolved out of a unique type cultural system through acculturation of different cultures at three dimensions (Dutta, 2004; Som, *et. al.* 2010):

1. *Local level acculturation – 1863 to 1901 – for meditation* – many a man of name and fame used to participate in the debate and discussion of Upanishodic thoughts, ideas and the spirituality of Brahmaism.
2. *National level acculturation – 1901 to 1921 – for education* – the elite class families from different parts of the country sent their sons and daughters for education at Tagore's Santiniketan.
3. *International level acculturation – 1921 to 1951 – for pilgrimage* – Tagore's foreign travels after the attainment of the Nobel Prize inspired many great personalities of the world to visit Santiniketan.

7. Specialty of Santiniketan's Culture

Culture is the integrated total sum of learned behavioural traits that are manifested and shared by members of society in a particular area or region (Murdock, 1945). Festivals, Songs and Dances, Arts, Customs, Sculpture and Architecture, Dress Pattern, Food Habits, Liberalism- Ethnicity, Religion, Language, Social Organizations etc. are the Elements of Culture. And, Santiniketan is the place of ‘Multiculturalism’ (it denotes the evolution of cultural diversity within a jurisdiction that is introduced by its selection policies and institutionalized by its settlement policies) (Burgess and Burgess, 2005). Major aspects of Santiniketan's culture are as follows (Mukhopadhyay, 2016) –

1. *Space-oriented* – Sculpture and Architecture etc.
2. *Value-oriented* – Customs, Religion, Environmental awareness etc.

3. *Innovative-oriented* – Festivals, Songs and dances, Arts, Dress Pattern etc.

One of the important characteristics of Santiniketan culture is the introduction of ‘*Rabindra-Saptaha*’ (Rabindra week) instead of contemporary week, whereas Wednesday is the weekly holiday and the week continues from that day. Consequently, the markets within the area of Santiniketan and its surroundings are being closed on Wednesday, especially educational activity (both academic and administrative) of Visva-Bharati institution. The Commodifications of the name of Tagore and his literary works have also become a very popular phenomenon in the heart of trade, commerce and business of Santiniketan and its surroundings.

7.1. Architecture of Santiniketan

Architecture is the living history of its creators and the most vivid commentary. It is a visible record of man’s emotional, intellectual and ethical aspirations through ages (Bandopadhyay, 2000). Santiniketan architecture is a varied synthesis of art and design influenced from multiple lands ranging from countries far away like Japan to local Bangla type traditional households on one hand and on the other hand of multiple time periods in Indian history ranging from ancient Buddhist and Brahmanical caves of Ajanta and Ellora to the Sultanate and Mughal architecture. It is a unique paradigm of a beautiful blend of a range of cultural influences, and this gives Santiniketan a character of its own that makes it stand out aesthetically and philosophically (Biswas and Mete, 2014). Santiniketan House and the stained-glass *Mandir (Upasana Griha)* was the first architectural outlook of Santiniketan. At present, three types of architectural construction are found in Santiniketan, these are- teachers’ quarters and student hostels, the institutional buildings and the poets’ residences (Banerjee, 2005) (see vide plate-1).

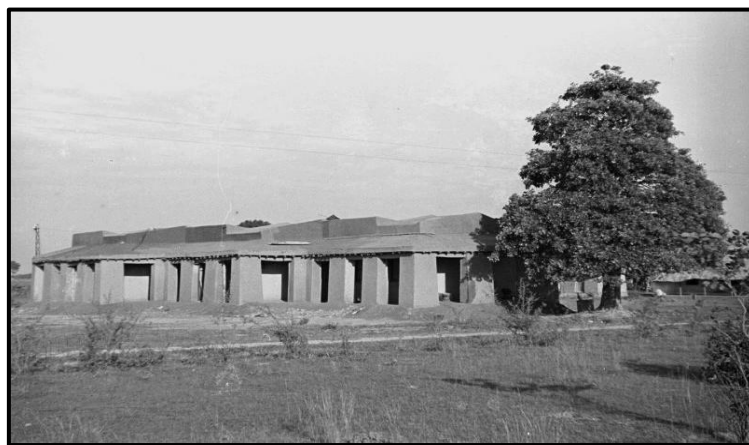


Plate-1: Kalo Bari (Black House) in the old days of Santiniketan
(Source: Rabindra Bhavana Archive)

7.2. Sculpture of Santiniketan

In the paintings of Nandalal Bose and Binodebihari Mukhopadhyay, the Santiniketan landscape has been captured for posterity. Ramkinkar Baiz’s outdoor sculpture is a part of our environment, not meant to be exhibited in museums. Children grow up with them, treating them as much a part of the environment as the trees and sky. Made of locally available material, these sculptural pieces depict life in and around Santiniketan. The Santhal Family or the Call of the Mill is so integral to Santiniketan that they do not evoke the same emotions when seen in its bronze cast in the capital of India (Banerjee, 1998) (see vide plate-2 and 3).



Plate-2



Plate-3

Plate-2: Sculpture of Santiniketan- The Santhal Family; Plate-3: Mahatma Gandhi
(Source: Photographs taken by researcher)

7.3. Rabindra Sangeet

The songs, which were written and composed by Rabindranath Tagore, are known as ‘Rabindra Sangeet’. The *sangeet* (Songs) are very much popular from the great artists to the common man, for its beauty and elegance. Various *Ragas* and *Raginis* i.e. different emotions and images in our minds with close relationship of Nature is the main attraction of Rabindra *Sangeet*. The songs of Rabindranath are the purest manifestations of eternal life and all that man thinks, dreams, craves and pines for. Rabindra *Sangeet* can undoubtedly be regarded as the voice of mankind (Ghosh, 2011).

Rabindranath Tagore enriched his music by taking the support of various music styles. It includes ‘Baul’, ‘Devotional songs’, ‘Bhajan’, ‘Kirtan’, ‘Thumri’, ‘Tappa’ etc. of Bengal regional music and various provincial light music like Classical music from Mysore, Gujrat, Karnataka, Punjab, Madras as well as western Vocal classical music (Dutch, Irish, Scottish Arabic music can be seen along with English) and the ancient music of the world (Chowdhury, 2003). ‘Sangeet Bhavana’ of Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan is the best musical institute of Rabindra *Sangeet* (see vide plate-4).



Plate-4



Plate-5

Plate-4: Tagore’s Songs and Plate-5: Tagore’s Dance

(Photographs taken by researcher)

7.4. Rabindra Nitya

Rabindranath’s thinking about dance evolved and led him to create his own distinct and original dance form (Rabindranritya) is one of the eminent creations of Santiniketan culture (see vide plate-5). The dance introduced by Tagore was the spontaneous physical expression of natural human feelings with varied emotions. Under Tagore’s guidance, dancers of Santiniketan engrossed movements from Kandyan, Javanese, and European folk dances to move forward for an artistic future through an innovative process. For the innovation in dancing technique of Rabindra Nitya, the thematic content of Tagore's dance-dramas (Chandalika, Chitrangada, Shyama etc.), songs, and poetry have been used. This theme is also reflected in the ethos of the modern age (Devi, 2015).

7.5. Painting of Santiniketan

Rabindranath Tagore as a painter has been immortalized by his paintings and his contribution to the decisive landmark in the history of Indian art through opening the ‘Kala Bhavana’ in Visva-Bharati. He had invited like-minded painters like Nandalal Bose to improve and continue the activities of Kala Bhavana for encouraging the evolution of an original vision and reflecting the perception and expression of the students. Presently it (the paintings on the wall of buildings) attracted outsiders that come to Santiniketan (see vide plate-6 & 7).



Plate-6



Plate-7

Plate-6 & 7: Wall paintings by Kala Bhavana *(Source: Photographs taken by researcher)*

8. Festivals of Santiniketan – An Expression of Cultural Dimension

The festivals had a significant role in the process of social change. Festivals of Visva-Bharati are no longer restricted to specific communities. Rather, they often broke the boundaries of social groups and strengthened the friendship between communities.

Main fairs and festivals of Santiniketan area are Poush Utsav (December), Vasanta Utsav (March), Maghotsav (11th Magha-January), Magh Mela, Nandan Mela (1, 2 December), Rabindra Janmotsav, Briksharopan Utsav, Halakarshan Utsav (23rd Sravana-August), Varsamangal, Saradotsav (on the eve of Puja vacation-September), Shilpo-utsav (30/31st Bhaddra in Bengali Month), Ananda Bazar (Mela), Rakhi Bandhan Utsav, Nabobarsha (1st Baishakh in Bengali Month), Barsho-Ses (31st Chaitra in Bengali Month), Buddho Jayanti, Rabindra Tirodhan (22nd Shrabon in Bengali Month), Rammoman Sharan (27th September), Maharshi Sharan (6th Magha in Bengali Month), Dinobondh Janmo-utsav (12th February), Gandhi-purnah (10th March) etc. The table-1 is described to the aspects of the festivals (Chowdhury, 1996; Dey, 1982; Mondal, 2010; Mondal, 1994) (see vide plate-8). One of the important characteristics of Santiniketan is seasonal festivals (see vide fig.1).

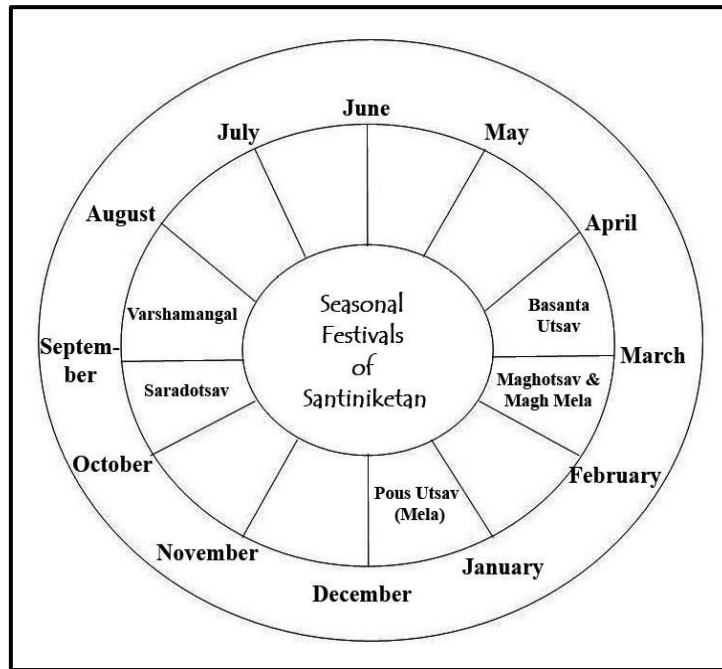


Figure-1: Seasonal cycle of Santiniketan festivals

(Source: Prepared by researcher; after Dey, 1982; Chowdhury, 1996)

Table-1: Categorization of Santiniketan Utsav (festivals of Santiniketan)

Sl. No.	Aspects of the Santiniketan Festivals	Name of the Festivals
1.	For evoking respects about the Primordial God-Brahma	Barshases, Nababarsha
2.	To feel the essence and necessity of different seasons of nature (seasonal festivals)	Barsha Mangal, Sharado Utsav, Basanta Utsav etc.
3.	For conservation of environmental balance and reduction of pollution	Briksharopona (afforestation programme)
4.	To improve the religious integrity	Rakhi Bandhan Utsav (Rakhi Purnima), Buddha Jayanti and Dharma Chakra Probartan
5.	To find out right path of our life through recall of the ancient great leader	Rabindra Jayanti, Maharshi Smaran, Dinbondhu Smaran, Gandhi Purnah etc.
6.	For increasing creativity, efficiency and financial support	Nandan Mela, Ananda Bazar (fair), Shilpo-utsav etc.
7.	To respect the foundation of the institute	Poush Utsav (Mela), Magho-utsav

(Source: Prepared by researcher; after S. Mondal, 2010)



Plate-8. a



Plate-8. b



Plate-8. c



Plate-8. d



Plate-8. e



Plate-8. f



Plate-8. g



Plate-8. h



Plate-8. i



Plate-8. j

Plate-8: Glimpses of Santiniketan's Festivals (a- *Basanta Utsav*; b- *Poush Utsav*; c- *Nandan Mela*; d- *Ananda Mela* (Bazar); e- *Halakarshan*; f- *Brikshoropana* (afforestation programme); g- Independence Day celebration; h- *Maharshi Smaran*; i- *Nababarsha*; j- *Barsha Mangal*)
(Source: Photographs taken by researcher)

9. Role of Visva-Bharati in the Cultural Dimensions of Santiniketan

Visva-Bharati acts as Convergent sector to accumulate all cultures of the whole world within one nest (Santiniketan) which is propagated (Som *et. al.*, 2010) as –

‘*Yatra visvam bhavati ekanidam*’
(‘Where the world makes its home in a single nest’).

The advancement of Santiniketan culture has developed through ‘Cultural Appropriation’ and ‘Enculturation’ characters of Visva-Bharati (Kowshik, 1980). In fact, ‘cultural appropriation’ involves the requisition of ideas, symbols, artifacts, image, sound, objects, forms or styles from other cultures, from art history, from popular culture, or other aspects of human-made visual or non-visual culture. And, the process by which people learn the requirements of their surrounding culture and acquire values and behaviours appropriate or necessary in that culture is known as ‘enculturation’. This cultural property appears as the forms of dress or personal adornment, music or art, religion, language, intellectual property or social behaviour etc., all of which may have deep cultural meaning to the original culture, but may be used as a new approach by those from outside that culture (Schneider, 2003; Grusec and Hastings, 2007). Santiniketan, the place of Visva-Bharati, creates a new cultural dimension in the world, as like the shadow of a big tree (see vide fig.2).

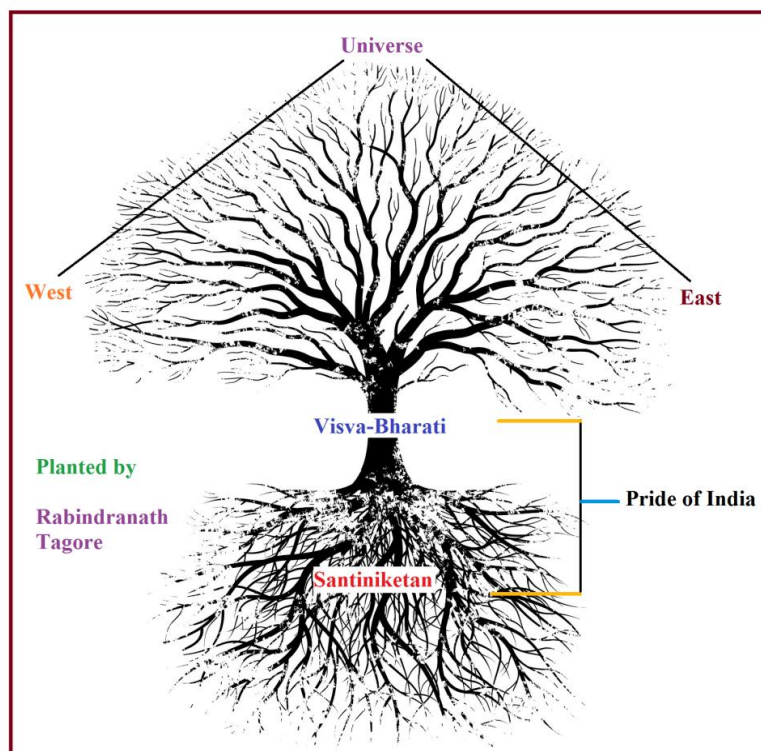


Figure-2: Cultural dimension of Visva-Bharati through the process of cultural appropriation
(Source: Prepared by researcher)

10. Diffusion Process of Santiniketan Culture

In the process of cultural diffusion, culture spread from its origin place to the destination area through a path. And in the path of cultural diffusion, there is a diffusion wave whose intensity is not same with time.

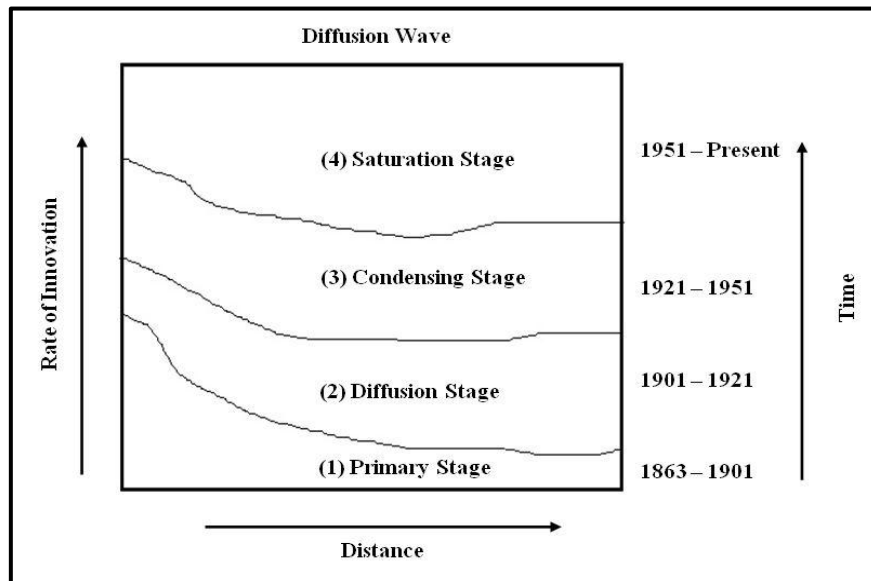


Figure-3: Diffusion process of Santiniketan culture

(Source: Dutta, 2005)

In the case of Santiniketan (as a cultural hearth) there was a diffusion wave. Based on the concept of Swedish Geographer Haggerstand (1971) about the diffusion wave, there were four stages of diffusion wave in the diffusion process of Santiniketan culture (Dutta, 2005). These are as follows (see vide fig.3) –

1. Primary Stage – 1863 to 1901
2. Diffusion Stage – 1901 to 1921
3. Condensing Stage – 1921 to 1951
4. Saturation Stage – 1951 to date.

According to Haggerstand's model, Santiniketan's core area has reached its condensation stages, but the peripheral area is below the condensation stage.

11. Conclusion

Revisiting Santiniketan as a cultural landscape reveals the profound ways in which space, culture, and identity are interwoven within a specific geographical setting. In addition to being a real place, Santiniketan is a lived and symbolic place that was influenced by Rabindranath Tagore's ideas on humanistic principles, aesthetic harmony, and holistic education. This study has looked at how Tagore's philosophical ideas were transformed into a distinctive spatial form where everyday activities, the environment, and architecture all work together to create a meaningful landscape through the prism of cultural geography. This study emphasizes Santiniketan's significance as a case study of a living cultural landscape by placing it within larger theoretical frameworks of cultural geography, such as place-making, landscape symbolism, and cultural memory. It sheds light on how space can be used as a platform for resistance and cultural expression and how, given their ecological, symbolic, and historical significance, such landscapes need to be properly recognized and conserved.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Dr. Jagannath Mondal: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

References

1. Bandopadhyay, N. (2009). *Shunya theke shantiniketan* (in Bengali), Visva-Bharati Ganthon Bivag, Kolkata, Pp.64.
2. Bandopadhyay, A. (2000). *Shantiniketan sthapatya paribesh o rabindranath* (in Bengali), Visva-Bharati Ganthon Bivag, Kolkata, Pp.143.

3. Banerjee, A. (1998). *Campus Architecture- The Built Environment of Rabindranath's Santiniketan*, Vastu Shilpa Foundation for Studies and Research in Environmental Design, Ahmedabad, India.
4. Banerjee, A. (2005). *Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes: The Ecological Cultural Visionaries*, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, Pp. 104.
5. Burgess, A. C. & Burgess, T. (2005). *Guide to Western Canada* (7th ed.), Globe Pequot Press, Guilford, Pp. 31.
6. Chatterjee, A. B. (1967). *Howrah: A study in Social Geography*, Calcutta, Pp- 184.
7. Chowdhury, D. (1996). *Shantiniketan-er Utsav o Rabindranath* (in Bengali), Pustak Bipani Pubd., Kolkata, Pp. 116.
8. Chowdhury, P.K. (2003). *Rabindra sangeet e shrastriyo sangeet er prabhab* (in bengali), Janasamaj, Vol. 4, No. 2, Pp. 8-15.
9. Devi, R. (2015). Rabindranath Tagore and Manipuri dance, *Manipurtimes 2015* written by The Peoples Chronicle.
10. Dey, S. K. (1389 B.S./ 1982). *Visva-Bharatir Utsav* (in bengali), Sri lakshmi Press, Bolpur.
11. Doukellis, P. N. & Mondoni, L. G. (2004). Proceedings of an International Symposium on 'Perception and Evaluation of Cultural Landscapes', Zakyntos, December 1997; Phsycha Foundation and XXIID.G. - European Commission, Athens.
12. Dutta, P. (2004). Santiniketan: Birth of an Alternative Cultural Space, published in 'Folklore, Public Sphere and Civil Society' (edited by M.D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal), Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi and National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai.
13. Dutta, K. L. (2005). *Bhugol chintar bikash* (in bengali), The world private limited, Kolkata, Pp. 202-206.
14. Ghosh, B. (2011). *Inside the World of Tagore's Music- Book Review on 'Rabindranath Tagore: The singer and his song'* by Reba Som, Penguin/Viking, India, Pp- 291; Published in Parabaas.
15. Grusec, J. E. and Hastings, P. D. (2007). *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research*, Guilford Press, New York, Pp. 547.
16. Kowshik, D. (1980). *Blossoms of light: some reflections on art in Santiniketan*, Visva-Bharati Pubd., Calcutta, Pp. 80.
17. Mondal, S. K. (1994). *Visva-Bharati utsav* (in bengali), Santiniketan, Pp.122.
18. Mondal, S. (2010). Shantiniketa o Sriniketan e Utsav Onusthan, Suchana o Bikash, in 'Rabindranather shantiniketa o Sriniketan' (edited by Tapan Kumar Som; et.al.) (in bengali), Deep prakashan, Kolkata.
19. Murdock, G.P. (1945). *The Common Denominator of Culture in the Science of Man in the World Crisis*, Ed. R. Linton, Columbia University Press, Columbia, Pp. 145.
20. Schneider, A. (2003). Appropriation: A critical reappraisal of the concept and its application in global art practices, *Social Anthropology* (2003), Cambridge University Press, London, Vol. 11, No. 2, Pp. 215-229.
21. Som, T. K. et.al. (2010). *Rabindranather shantiniketa o Sriniketan* (edited) (in bengali), Deep prakashan, Kolkata, Pp. 467.
22. Thompson, I. H. (2000). *Ecology, Community and Delight: Sources of values in landscape architecture*, E and FN Spon, London.

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2025. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>