

Sriniketan: A Model Centre for Rural Reconstruction

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I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Sriniketan as a Rural Reconstruction Centre

Over a century ago, Rabindranath Tagore, as a reaction to the colonial system of education, felt the need for a non-conventional and an integral system of education. To give shape to his ideas, he founded Visva-Bharati and its two centres – Santiniketan and Sriniketan, each having different programmes and objectives.

The Institute of Rural Reconstruction was founded in 1922 at Surul at a distance of about three kilometres from Santiniketan. It was formally inaugurated on February 6, 1922 with Leonard Elmhirst as its first Director. Thus the second but contiguous campus of Visva-Bharati came to be located at a site which assumed the name of Sriniketan. The chief object was to help villagers and people to solve their own problems instead of a solution being imposed on them from outside. Sriniketan focused on agriculture and rural development with the co-operative efforts of the villagers themselves and its aim was to develop a better life for the people of rural India by educating them to be self-reliant and encouraging the revival of village arts and crafts.

In consonance with the ideas about reconstruction of village life, a new type of school meant mainly for the children of neighbouring villages who would eventually bring the offering of their acquired knowledge for the welfare of the village community was also conceived. This school, Siksha-Satra, was started in Santiniketan in 1924 but was shifted to Sriniketan in 1927. The Lok-Siksha Samsad, an organization for the propagation of non-formal education amongst those who had no access to usual educational opportunities, was started in 1936. Siksha-Charcha for training village school teachers followed next year.

Rabindranath Tagore's work in "village reconstruction" at Sriniketan is not as widely known as his work at Santiniketan. The Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IRR) was Tagore's attempt to put to work his idea about village reform. Tagore has recalled how he, a "town-bred" individual, came to recognize the "sorrow and poverty of villagers" while being a manager of his family's agricultural estates in East Bengal in the 1890s.

In 1906, Tagore released his 15 point Village Reconstruction Charter in Pabna (now in Bangladesh). This document makes clear that making villages autonomous was chief among his concerns. It was necessary to use "indigenously made goods." Further, all the village disputes had to be settled within through a process of village arbitration. A community grain bank was necessary to guard against famines. In a gesture towards the necessity of women's autonomy, the Charter asks that "housewives" be trained in a trade that could enhance the family's income.

While Tagore sought autonomy for villages, he did not wish that they remain isolated. In his view, it was necessary that "brotherhood" was cultivated between "hamlets, village and districts."

A few of Tagore's concerns were generally shared by reform minded intellectuals and government officials: science and history had to be taught in village schools; and, demographic data had to be compiled meticulously for every village. Many of his concerns were however unique. His Charter, for instance, stressed the need for building communal harmony and asked that the essence of all religions be taught in schools. The IRR was founded on the seven acres of land that Tagore bought near Shantiniketan in 1912. He encouraged his son, Ratindranath Tagore, his brother in law and a friend's son to study agriculture and dairy farming at the University of Illinois, Urbana, USA. The three of them came down with malaria at Sriniketan upon their return and could not continue to work there. Tagore later invited Leonard Elmhirst, an Englishman who had studied agricultural economics at Cornell University, USA, to help build the IRR. Elmhirst did much of the founding work on the IRR between 1921 and 1923. He helped get an American philanthropist to extend financial support for Sriniketan. At his request, his Quaker friends in the US sent a doctor who worked for three years to control malaria in the villages nearby. Idealists from far and near were involved in the work at Sriniketan. The work at IRR unfolded through various departments. The Education Department included a school for boys above eight years from all castes and a school for training teachers in music, agriculture and hygiene. Both the students and teachers had to learn a village craft. The Agriculture Department did experiments to check if new crops could be grown locally and held demonstrations of their work for local farmers. It also tried to promote modern animal husbandry. In order to help supplement local incomes, the Industries Department introduced new cottage

industries. The Village Welfare Department, whose work covered fifteen villages, focused on issues of road, tank and school maintenance and ran a circulating library. A weaver's co-operative was founded in the mid-1930s. Picnics, games, theatre and socio-religious activities were organized to combine work with joy. Old festivals were revived and new ones such as Vriksh Ropan (Tree Planting Festival) and Navanna (New Rice festival) were inaugurated. These festivals are still celebrated. The details above offer a glimpse of the vision animating an early experiment in village reform in India. The local zamindars are said to have been indifferent to Sriniketan. The responses of the small farmers and artisans to it are not clearly known. In 1924, Tagore noted in reference to Sriniketan: "Our object is to try to flood the choked bed of village life with happiness. For this, the scholars, poets, the musicians, the artists have to collaborate." For Tagore, the cities and villages ought to support each other. Prasanna, the theatre director, has nourished this moral inheritance through Charaka, the handloom co-operative he has founded in Bhimanakone, Shimoga District. He has often observed: "Most of the minds that have built Charaka are modern, urban minds. The designers do not even know Kannada; but they stay with us and work with us. While villages can gain from creative collaboration with people from the city, cities have to learn the value of physical labour from villages."

Tagore's ideas of rural development reverberated from his saying: "If we could free even one village from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established... Let a few villages be rebuilt in this way and I shall say they are my India. That is the way to discover the true India." Tagore had proclaimed: "We have to reconstruct our national life with the village as the centre. To bring completeness of life to the villages has been a dream of mine of longstanding."

The great social reformer wanted to develop India without taking any help from outside as far as possible. As India lives in her villages, he felt that the only way to develop the country was to reconstruct the villages with the help of the villagers by themselves, through a suitable village level organization.

To be a complete man was the concept of Tagore's education. He advocated an open education system which would be environment friendly devoid of all sorts of stringent rules and regulations. The Brahmacharya Vidyalaya in Santiniketan was the manifestation of his ideas. Tagore felt the need for a separate school for village boys. He could not forget that after all he belonged to a people, the great majority of whom lived in villages, in poverty and ignorance, neglected by a small minority in towns whom they fed with the toil of their hands. This led the poet to set up Sikha Satra in 1924 in Sriniketan as a residential school for the village boys from the neighbourhood. Its aim was to give an all-round training to the boys so that after completion of training, they could go back to their respective villages and carry on the work of rural reconstruction together with the trade they had learnt. Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Santiniketan in 1924 was very instrumental in the light of evolution of Sikha Satra.

Tagore's chief aim was to formulate a kind of education in which the villagers themselves would play the key role. He wrote: "I am, therefore all the more keen that Sikha Satra would justify the ideal I have entrusted in it and should represent the most important function of Sriniketan in helping the students for the attainment of manhood complete in all its varying aspects. Our people should need more than anything else a real scientific training that could inspire in them the courage of experiment and initiative of mind that we lack as a nation."

Revival of the Spirit of Sriniketan: Contemporary Issues

Tagore realized the importance of modern science in agricultural practices. He wanted that agricultural farming centres be modernized and the farmers be given proper scientific training. Dr M S Swaminathan, the noted Agricultural Scientist, has recognized the importance of Tagore's concepts even in recent times. He has suggested certain ways and means by which modern scientific applications of biotechnology could be combined with traditional knowledge so that agriculture and farming operations could be made intellectually satisfying and economically rewarding. Tagore visualised the role of Sriniketan as a centre where every scholar would become an entrepreneur.

In a report published in "The Times of India", September 5, 2016, the migration of unemployed village youths to cities is unlikely to stop now. The younger generation is shunning farming because it feels it is a menial job and the remuneration is not commensurate with the effort put in. Studies have shown that 50% of India's population will live in urban areas by 2030. This migration from villages to cities will lead to a lot of proxy farmers taking care of multiple plots of land. When you have large landmasses, you have to mechanise. Experts say that the shortage of farm labour and its rising cost are among the main reasons for increasing mechanisation of Indian farming.

In an another report published in "The Telegraph", October 30, 2016 on Singur, it appears that persuading the younger generation to take up farming is a huge challenge. There is an attempt to amalgamate land-parcels which indicates that farmers are desperate for better livelihood. Noted economist, Subhanil Chowdhury, Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata, believes that several reasons, from the rising cost of inputs to lower price realisation, are threatening to make agriculture a viable livelihood.

Fraser Thomson, Director, Alfa Bita, has recently authored a report on adopting sustainable business model in agriculture and has mentioned that such models could generate 22 million youth jobs in India. There is great scope of innovation in agricultural practices. When it comes to yield, large farms above 2 hectares should be distinguished from small farms below 2 hectares. Mobile internet considerably helps small holders telling farmers by text messages when to plant seeds and informing them of crop prices in the market. This will lead to an enormous productivity gains amongst small farmers. Application of technology can do miracles. Great improvements can be brought about through renovation such as applying precision farming techniques on the use of fertilizers, soil health, etc. Fraser Thomson speaks about large opportunities in India in improving productivity in the value-chain among the top three opportunities, low-income food market is number one, food-waste and value-chain is number two and technology in small farms is number three. All these three sources plus improving productivity could be a significant generator of jobs.

As Mr. Rakesh Kapur, Chairman, The Fertiliser Association Of India, New Delhi, has commented in an article entitled “Enhancing Income of Farmers” published in The Mint, 30th November, 2016 that small and marginal holdings constitute 85% of land holdings of the size below 1 hectare. Fragmented holdings have resulted in economically unviable units of irrigated land due to higher cost of inputs. Fragmentation has an adverse effect on the ability to use certain mechanical equipments that lead to serious problems of dependence on scarce manual labour for performing agriculture operations. With increasing population, land fragmentation is unavoidable. However, a new approach to cultivation and management may sustain productivity. At present, tenant farmers are cultivating under informal arrangements and refrain from making any capital investment. Certainty of price, time period and other attendant conditions under formal leasing agreement can give assurance to both land owner and lessee. State government should devise a mechanism for consolidation of land units and setting up of farmers’ co-operatives. Government may also consider enabling other land aggregating measures such as long-term leases for select crops and help promote long-term investments in technology. Increased awareness at level of Tenant farmers with available technologies would enable higher yields. Opening of Public Private Partnership (PPP) model can be another initiative to enable multiple farmers, multiple aggregators and marketers to work together to enhance farmers income.

In recent years, economic growth and improved urban infrastructure is making rural dwellers to shift to better pay jobs outside agriculture, in turn leading to increase in agricultural wages. National calamities and pest attacks aggravate the problem pushing farmers to indebtedness. Therefore, there is need for pragmatic reforms and policy initiatives to sustain Indian agriculture and improve economic condition of farmers. Income of farmers needs to be supplemented substantially by allied activities of dairying, fisheries, horticulture, medicinal and aromatic crop cultivation etc.

Innovative farm-technologies, their dissemination and adoption holds the key to increasing food grain production from current level of 252 Million MT to 325 Million MT by 2025. The internet of Things (IOT) is transforming the agriculture industry, enabling farmers to contend with the enormous challenges they face. There is pragmatic need for encouragement of such Big Data methods, analysis and approaches which can deliver information at faster and in affordable way. Branding of the commodities can also provide value addition in enhancing farm incomes.

The Cottage Industries of Sriniketan

The Small Scale Cottage Industry and handicraft items of Sriniketan are identified as special ethnic and traditional products, recognised nationally and even internationally with high esteem. Students of Tagore’s art and craft centre at Sriniketan and the artists of Kalabhavan are known for their extra-ordinary skill and craftsmanship.

The surrounding part of the rural economy at this region is basically thriving on plural economy, sometimes contributing to seasonal sustenance of village families. There are several means by which these skill and artistry pass through generations and people learn to earn from their own family units from very childhood.

A number of survey reports in the Surul village adjoining Sriniketan reveal that the dwelling units of this village are mostly living on traditional Kantha Stitch designing on silk and cotton sarees and other accessories, upholstries continuing throughout the year. These items involve most of the women of the villages from mainly minority and backward classes who have developed unique skills through repetitive and voluminous productivity. The men of these families search for market outlets and help these products fetching a fair price. It is very interesting to note that now-a-days this particular occupation has taken a systematic mass engagement pattern where a number of self-help groups with cluster of at least 9 to 11 or more women together, earning their daily wages and even forming a co-operative for financial support through micro-finance. NIFT, the nation-level textile organisation has been working on this model and a good number of NGOs are also coming forward for utilising these rich resource of skilled artisans. These products fortunately earned reputation not only in the local and national markets, emporiums, shops and exhibitions but they are also exported outside to attract a special focus on ladies and gents’ fashion statements. Some of the latest of such organised marketing

find expressions through Bangamela and Banga Sammelan held each year in the United States, the Poush Mela and Maghmela at Santiniketan and Sriniketan and also Banga Sanskriti Mela at Kolkata pavilions. Besides, Delhi Hut, Kolkata Bazars and all such textile outlets of cities like Calcutta boast of these traditional clothings enriched with Kantha designs. Freelance sellers are also in the market with special stock and price offering door-step services for these very much ethnic hand-made products. While Kantha Stitch occupies the centre stage of Sriniketan's sustainable economy, there are many more which endowed value to develop Tagore's dreams of turning Sriniketan as a hub of multi-dimensional artist. Leather goods and handicrafts are equally adorable and the tourists visiting Sriniketan never miss out on the venue of Amar Kutir where leather products, Dokra items, Cane items, Jute products, Batik accessories and clothings, not to speak of Kantha again are on massive display that became an eye-catching sight. Terracota is another speciality masterpiece of the region. The modern architectural interiors, wall designing, roof and floor tiles and decoration pieces are mostly crafted with this material capturing the craze of the modern designers. The cottage shaped buildings, resorts, corporate houses and establishments prevalently use this material for beautification. This product has picked up great commercial demand all-over West Bengal as well as India which has its in the rust coloured burnt soil of Santiniketan adding to the aesthetic importance of the place.

It is a marvel how the rural artisans can excel to the standard of art and perfection so that the price of the articles may seem to be invaluable. The thermocal Durga, Ganesha, Replica of temples of repute exhibit amazing signs of excellence and signature expertise. Proper education, training and workmanship of these artists are the pride of the nation which contribute to sustain their economy in their own original way - Tagore had this vision as a pioneering contribution.

The Tribals and Adibasis, the santhals of the village, tend to depend mainly on agriculture, or even agri-horticulture. The flower nurseries have seen booming business now-a-days at that place, Plants and plantation export-based programmes are expanding due to the fertile soil and a number of people are working on it which may convert the important destination Sriniketan into a piece of Green Earth where florists and agriculturists tirelessly dedicate them into creating beautiful Nurseries of plants and flowers of special types including orchids and medicinal plants and thus toiling on lush greenery of crops and harvests.

Last but not the least is to speak of the traditional village huts that are held on the weekend to attract tourists and shoppers and travelers as well. The ethnic traditional ornaments made out of fruits and floral seeds are really worth, the modern tokens of ethnic costume items. These items attracts the women folks who style themselves on rustic look of tribal ethnic fashion. The Hut is also warm with single string musical instrument called Ektara and the rendition of village folk singers, the Bauls, enchant people with a typical folklore of Baul Song symphonically attuned with the bohemian beats of Ektara.

All these clubbed together make Sriniketan a special place to visit. A most endearing spot for the leisure hunters, an attractive place of education, excursion for college students and this part of Visva-Bharati has amazing stock of art and sculpture, architecture that grew and developed with the march of time not to mention that tourism remains an additional source of income into the hub of Sriniketan plural economy.

Time has come to analyse and discuss whether Sriniketan model has really dream-cum-true of Tagore's thought of rural upliftment through sustainable development. Big cities, big industries and large scale employment generation may capture the manifesto of the government's economic policies and guidelines, but these think-tank policies may not always be feasibly implemented in the villages and in the remote corners of countryside population. But backward parts of major areas of the cities, paralyse the city-life. This at macro level affects the whole national development with increasing rates of mass illiteracy, superstitions, lack of health and hygiene, malnutrition, unemployment and starvation.

To overcome this vital symptoms of interior sickness, prevention is urgent and necessary. Tagore's thought on this line times ahead have envisaged the mission of self-sustainable villages which can feed their aborigines on their own ways and accorded by their self-inherited ability. This model, visualised by the poet, helps the heritage village perennial poverty and ameliorate its economy thereby strengthening the national solidarity.

II. CONCLUSION:

In recent times, our returns from agriculture are reducing. While the pressure on land is increasing, the average size of a farm holding is going down to below one hectare. Prime farm lands are being used for non-farm purposes. The National Commission on Farmers has elaborated on the need to persuade educated youth, including farm graduates, to take part in agriculture as a profession. It has been suggested by national policy makers that a strategy be adopted to improve the productivity and profitability of small holdings through proper land use policies, technologies and market linkages. The scope of agro-industries and agri-business should be enlarged; and opportunities should be created in the services sector that will promote technological and economic upgradation of farm operations.

Dr. Swaminathan has pointed out the need to revive the spirit of Sriniketan. The new Sriniketan should pioneer the concepts of eco-technology where science and technology will be combined with the best in traditional knowledge and ecological prudence. The new Sriniketan could also show the way to a new India where Tagore's belief that the villages would be the centre of our national life will become a reality.

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