

CAMPUS AS A MUSEUM: THE INTERLACING ROOTS OF KALA BHAVANA, SANITINIKETAN

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Abstract As a counter argument to colonial art education system in India emphasised through the agencies of institution 'building', Tagore experimented with a hypothesis of space vis-à-vis place, through a system of community creation and radical pedagogic processes. The paper will navigate the overlapping zones of the spatial art historical markers across the campus of Kala Bhavana, the fine-art institute of Visva-Bharati which was ground zero for radical modernism in Indian art during the first half of the twentieth century; and the pockets of tribal and migrant communities emerging from it and around it, vis-à-vis the public perception of viewing this campus as a heritage site appropriating through the lens of capitalist semi-urban aspirations. The binary of the campus space is noticeable in its seclusion and exclusivity which artists' studios or institutional premises require, and also as a site of public display and discourse, at the focal point of Santiniketan's tourism map. As a result of prolonged auto-ethnographic observation through lived experiences, the paper takes under considerations aspects of the institution's formative history which expands on Tagore's vision and argues on the scope of viewing methods, spectacle-spectator conventions and interventions.

Key Words: campus, art pedagogy, museum, lived-space, auto-ethnography, Indian modernism, popular culture, tourism, heritage site, UNESCO, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan

'...institution should be a perpetual creation by the co-operative enthusiasm of teachers and students, growing with the growth of their soul; a world in itself, self-sustaining, independent, rich with ever-renewing life radiating life across space and time, attracting and maintaining around it a planetary system of dependent bodies. Its aim should lie in imparting life-breath to the complete man, who is intellectual as well as economic, bound by social bonds, but aspiring towards spiritual freedom and final perfection.' (Rabindranath Tagore, 1922)

The premise of this paper grew out of a degree of auto-ethnographic process - first from my own experience as a student of fine arts at Kala Bhavana and through my constant

questioning of the relationship between pedagogy and art practice demarcated by regional distinctions, and of the gap between artistic aspirations and their implications in post independent India. It is further provoked by the changing cultural landscape and ethos of the campus and its adjoining localities. The geographical parameters of Santiniketan grew out of a barren rural terrain, sparsely populated by (santhal) tribal settlements and landlords in the late nineteenth century. But since the formative years of the institution, there have been a steady influx of people and cultures from around the globe, creating a true cultural and intellectual cauldron, which best describes Santiniketan.

However, a hundred years later Santiniketan has also witnessed a commercial boom, particularly in the last three decades, where the varsity town transformed into one of the most popular tourist destinations in the state of West Bengal, as well as became a preferred destination for real-estate market. This has laid out two drastic ways of life, gaze and order in the area, where the campus spaces of the university are demarcated by boundary walls and protocols, while the popular identity of Santiniketan outside the university campus prevails through its quota of amusement. The place of Santiniketan in its current identity has therefore been created through a complex stratification of a site of education, iconised as a site of heritage, negotiated for the popular imagination of tourism. It is here where cultural symbolism of the elite, the popular and the indigenous breathe and grow together, and project a glaringly complex question of what is 'heritage'.

Is heritage a static identity which needs to be preserved and immortalised as an object? Or can heritage be argued through the lens of its ability to evolve and stay relevant and at the heart of its community? Particularly in case of Visva Bharati, which is an active academic institution as well as the cultural capital of the region, should the scope of its heritage identity be understood only through its tangible territorial markers of the campus? The idea of 'hybrid' heritage evokes the imagination of the intangible aspects of a 'space', separating it from the palpable markers of a 'place' and change as a focus in understanding historical dimension of a cultural practice (Bortolotto, 2007, Jong 2009). Due to my long and intimate association with this campus, I have been in a position to study the evolving nature of the campus, where there is a constant conflict between the rootedness one feels with their alma-mater, the rootedness in the experience of art and art historical anecdotes which gave shape to this campus and the intangible knowledge accumulated outside the classroom scope, its rich cultural recourse and precedence, and the vulnerabilities of the larger social fabric. Based on this core conflict of an insider's perspective of Kala Bhavana campus, as opposed to the spectator's perception of a heritage site on view, the paper will demonstrate a broader unique scope of what the site of Kala Bhavana campus, its art historical markers and methods of viewing it as a museum, entails.

Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan is a public university of national importance in the state of West Bengal, India, as it was enacted by the Indian parliament in 1951.ⁱ Prior to its university status in the pre-independence context, the scope of pedagogic experiments since 1901 spearheaded by Rabindrnath Tagore, first grew as a school in the form of a Bramhacharya ashramii, parallel to the territorial evolution of the land, the landscape, eventually giving shape to a distinct campus, and by extension a porous community of thinkers and scholars from across the world. Here social systems were built on the philosophy of universal brotherhood with a common goal of community living, interdisciplinary engagement of scholarship and knowledge regeneration for socio-economic sustenance, instead of hierarchical educational system and streamlining of profession based on class, caste and discrimination of ethnicity and gender. The aim of the Visva-Bharati, was to create an institution of an all India character and to concentrate in this institution the different cultures of the East and the West, 'especially those that have taken their birth in India, or found shelter in her house to establish a new education on the basis, not of nationalism, but a wider relationship of humanity' (Annual Report, Visva Bharati 1923). Between the background setting of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation movement in 1920 and the Quit India Movement in 1942, Tagore launched his own non- political movement of cultural confluences in Santiniketan where Visva Bharati was formally established in 1922, and Tagore chose a Sanskrit verse as the institution's motto 'Yatra Visvam Bhavatieka Nidam', which translates to, 'where the whole world meets in a single nest' (Figure 1).

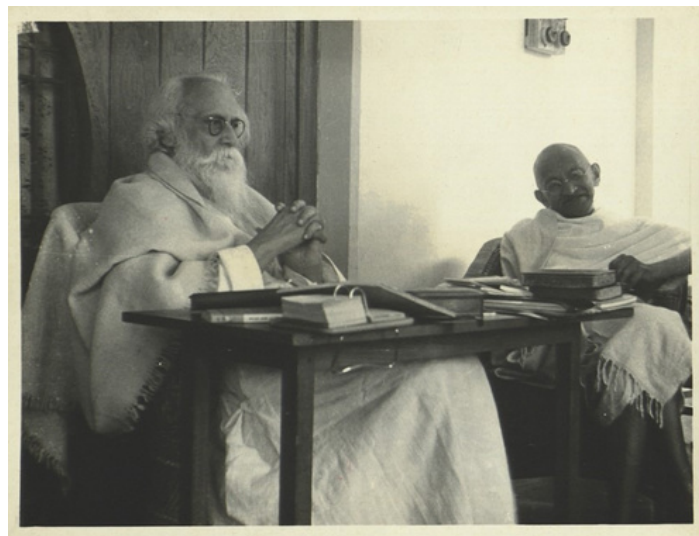


Fig. 1: Rabindranath Tagore meeting M.K. Gandhi at Santiniketan in 1925. Source: Ravindran Havana Archive, VB

Moving away from the commodity centred colonial knowledge-system and its classification of regions and territories; Tagore projected pedagogy as a universal knowledge network, which one could argue initiated a potential process of decolonisation within the Indian cultural milieu. The social and cultural purpose, aim, value and practice of culture and its objects, its use and identity in the society changed drastically during eighteenth and nineteenth century in India. Along with it changed the projection of urban cosmopolitanism and provinces and the sharpening of region-specific cultural and material representations of India to the outer world. As a counter argument to colonial institution building aligned around the new urban centric aspirations, Tagore used pedagogy and rural reconstruction as the tools which activated a new community and public sphere in Santiniketan by facilitating critical engagement and a multicultural learning scope.

The dominating agencies and power structure used in colonial knowledge accumulation were essentially located within the surveys and educational institutions. Regional peculiarities and merits were being increasingly recorded, accounted and analysed in this process of knowledge consolidation. Archaeological surveys, art collections and museums, art exhibitions and art historiography –all in the process of documentation and knowledge production - had widened the gap of territorial cultural orientations and regional artistic traits, within the country. The cultural perception of the country became more categorical, inwards and narrow, as Bernard S Cohn breaks it down further –

‘It was the British who, in the nineteenth century defined in an authoritative and effective fashion how the value and meaning of the objects produced or found in India were determined. It was the patrons who created a system of classification which determined what was valuable, that which would be preserved as monuments of the past, that which was collected and placed in the museums, that which would be bought and sold, that which would be taken from India as mementoes and souvenirs of their own relationship to India and Indians.’ (Cohen, 1996)

The beginnings of Santiniketan and the institution of Visva Bharati can be seen as an inaugural moment of critical pedagogy in modern India, where ‘the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation’ and ‘pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and become a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation’ (Freire, 1968; English trns., 1970)iii. In the case of Visva Bharati, both the stages described by Freier, are noticeable but as two separate histories of the institution, more specific to the growth of Kala Bhavana. Tagore situated the scope for Kala Bhavana as the intellectual core of the institution’s pedagogic design that would reframe the cultural orientation of the entire set-up at Santiniketan. In Tagore’s inaugural

speech introducing the purview and ideal of Visva Bharati, he underlines three factors that would constitute the core pedagogic praxis of the institution – i) to perceive the university as the site of knowledge production, instead of instruction; ii) to perceive culture as a comprehensive social and intellectual reference for pedagogy, instead of projecting difference in religious, political and moral entitlements; and iii) to perceive pedagogy as a social tool instead of a professional one (Tagore, 1919). These fundamental shifts introduced by Tagore in 1919 strongly resonated with the future pedagogic possibilities, as argued by Freier. Out of this concern for knowledge stagnation and cultural passivity, Tagore inspired a shift in teacher student dynamics in the institution. The ashram or the residential unit of the institution was intended to facilitate teacher-student relationship that would go beyond the formal purview of the classroom.

With these radical shifts implemented by Tagore, the campus of Visva Bharati became a site of social and pedagogic experiment in dialogue with the world at large, leading to the counter argument for colonial art education system in India, which was emphasised through the agencies of institution building. Tagore experimented with a hypothesis of space vis-à-vis place, through a system of community creation and radical art pedagogic practices. His elaborate work on rural reconstruction through the formation of Sriniketaniv on one side, along with the intellectual pursuits through the multiple facilitators and scholarly departments of the Santiniketan campus, led to a panoptic purview of post independent and modern institutional approach.

The model of art pedagogy which developed in Kala Bhavana was based on a constantly evolving and fluid curriculum. The formative phase of Kala Bhavana started with an open format of learning from its immediate surroundings, the distinct arid landscape of the region, ethnographic studies developing over time, a scope of pedagogical projects which gradually shaped a distinct language of visual and cultural aesthetics in Bengal, which was in complete contrast to the other most crucial art school of Bengal, the Government School of Art, Calcuttav, and that of the Bengal School idiom of visual aesthetics spearheaded by Rabindranath Tagore's nephew Abanindranath Tagore.

The articulation of modernism, as projected by the artistic and cultural practices in Kala Bhavana have been largely addressed through individual artistic and intellectual figures of eminence, which the institution produced during its first four decades. That historiography has established people as the main markers of its history, and has prioritised individual artists above a larger inclusive ideology of a community that was formed through Kala Bhavana. R Siva Kumar established the scope of Contextual Modernism (1997)^{vi}, situated within the artistic and pedagogic scope of the institution through individual artistic careers of Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Benodebehari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij.

However, the larger purview of the artistic practices which happened in Santiniketan between 1920s to 1950s, with unique architectural styles, murals, and outdoor sculptures, across the campus, demonstrate the larger purview of this paper, where artworks were being liberated from conditioned viewing of a gallery space and was being created as a response to its immediate surrounding and with the urgency of relocating art as a social facilitator, than an elite preoccupation. Disassociating from the idea of artwork being primarily an object for viewing, art practices in Santiniketan instead developed towards becoming an experiential process rooted in its site of making, as well as in its thematic position. This was gradually inculcated through a mode of harmonious dialogue with nature, the changing seasons of the land and collective participation of the people who came from various parts of the world as well as locally from multiple indigenous groups. Tagore also displaced the idea of festivals being religion centric in India, replacing it with the purpose of celebrating environment and its conservation through annual ceremonies like Vasanta Utsav, Varsha-Mangal, Briksharopan and Halakarshan vii(Figure 2). All of these tied together became, and continues to be significant cultural markers of the region, which has made Santiniketan and its campus a site of unique intellectual exercise and a tremendous public spectacle. In the hypothesis of space vis-à-vis place, Tagore recognised as well as created elements from the immediate topographical as well as environmental characters as resurgent symbols of cultural integration, which expanded the place called Santiniketan to a space where intellectual and cultural rhetoric can be tested, applied and amplified. Briksharopan and the other seasonal ceremonies as mentioned before have had been always open to a larger community participation, beyond the ambit of students and teachers of the institution. These are festivals for which Tagore have penned a considerable collection of songs, designed cultural rituals and protocols around it, which with years have only piqued public interest and fascination for the spectacle. These ceremonies are now recreated and observed in numerous parts of the country and the world, in schools, as well as within socio-cultural organisations.



Fig 2: (Top panel) Vaitalik procession mural by Surendranath Kar; (bottom panel) Vasanta Utsav (Spring Festival) mural by Nandalal Bose. Source: Santiniketan Murals

Santiniketan has been recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2023. Over the century, it has emerged as one of the most popular tourist destinations on the cultural map of West Bengal. UNESCO summarised that 'Santiniketan embraced a unique brand of internationalism, that drew upon ancient, medieval and folk traditions of India as well as Japanese, Chinese, Persian, Balinese, Burmese and Art Deco forms to create a rich tapestry of art, architecture, interiors, furniture, landscape and campus design.'^{viii} While identifying the unique cultural value and environmental significance of the campus of Santiniketan, the negotiations between a lived space of a campus vis-à-vis a controlled and regulated territory that is now reckoned to be a site of world heritage, is rife. The lens through which these cultural and environmental connotations have had developed has its own binaries. For ashramiks (people who are and has been associated with the university, like current and former students, teachers, and university staffs) and locals of Santiniketan, there exists a distinct narrative of occupying and projecting the markers of the history of the campus. This often happens through a variety of trees which have been at the centre of the campus, at the heart of the university grounds and even at the centre of its pedagogic process, and have been the primary witness of this institution's legacy for over a century now. Instead of being a passive bystander, trees and plants in the campus of Visva Bharati actively contribute to the community and its celebrations. They have their own anecdotes and their own history, much like the verifiable histories of people

associated with the campus, its architecture, murals and outdoor sculptures, and their inter-relations. Contrarily, for tourists, much like in case of most predominant museums structures and heritage sites, the subjects of the spectacle is distant, described and usually positioned in time through its historical accounts, and further asserted by popular iconography. In the tourism sector, heritage is perceived through ceremonial objectification and as a relic. However, a campus has life of its own, not distantly located in a time period, neither conforming to the prevalent popular narratives of its perception that is trending among the local self-claimed guides, often stimulating the metaphor in the 'cabinet of curiosities' further challenging the politics in the collective gaze, that is returned. The arbitration between the order of the heritage-ness and the intangibility along with the vulnerability which come with a habituated place, like Santiniketan, firmly push the boundaries of 'space as the experience', 'space as the spectacle', and 'space as the cultural marker'.

Site as a Metaphor



Fig. 3: Old Nandan or the first house of Kala Havana. Currently it has been converted as the Printmaking Department of the Institution. Source: Ravindran Havana Archive, VB

Kala Bhavana functions from its current campus since 1929ix, where it initially had a singular central symmetrical structure, designed by Surendranath Kar and the house was named Nandan by Rabindranath (Figure 3). Prior to that for a decade, the studio of the institution performed from multiple shared locations within the broader campus. The structure has evolved with time, and so has the pedagogic purposes of the space. It has a central hall with glass protrusion on its terrace creating an unique system of ventilation. The space was used as a museum space to store and periodically display art works. It was also used as common gathering room for faculty, students and guests of the institution. What was once the ceremonial front of the building is now however out of sight. The front of the structure now holds a two-part mosaic mural done by Somnath Hore between 1977 and 1982. It now houses the Printmaking department of Kala Bhavana and is referred to as the Old Nandan.x And the mural plays the role of a backdrop to the evolution of the campus.



Fig 4: The Ficus Virens tree, popularly known as Cheena Bot in Kala Bhavana Campus, in front of Old Nandan (currently Print-making dept.). Source: Author, 2024.

The majestic tree which holds its ground at the centre of the campus is a Pilkhan or Pakur tree, but colloquially called Cheena Bot in Kala Bhavana. (Figure 4) The etymology of cheena bot is not known however there is an anecdote. When the pioneering artist Nandalal Bose, also referred as Mastermoshai (Master) in Kala Bhavana, was planning to move base from Calcutta to Santiniketan, Abanindranath gifted him a Ficus Viren bonsai, brought from Japan (Panchanan Mandal, 1968). In one of his trips to Santiniketan from Kolkata, Nandalal carried the bonsai with him and decided to liberate it from its constraining pot (Figure 5). The popular narrative is that in the hands of Nandalal, the tree grew to its full capacity. The nucleus of a modern and independent identity and voice in Indian art, launched by Abanindranath Tagore through the Bengal School of Art, bloomed through Nandalal Bose, who took the movement forward and liberated the pedagogical methodologies and artistic projections associated with Abanindranath, after coming to Santiniketan. The metaphor is hard to miss. The oral history or reminiscence about the tree is inconclusive, but its allegory with the formation of the institution, stands strong, and marks the configuration of a space, that would be the habitus of Kala Bhavana.

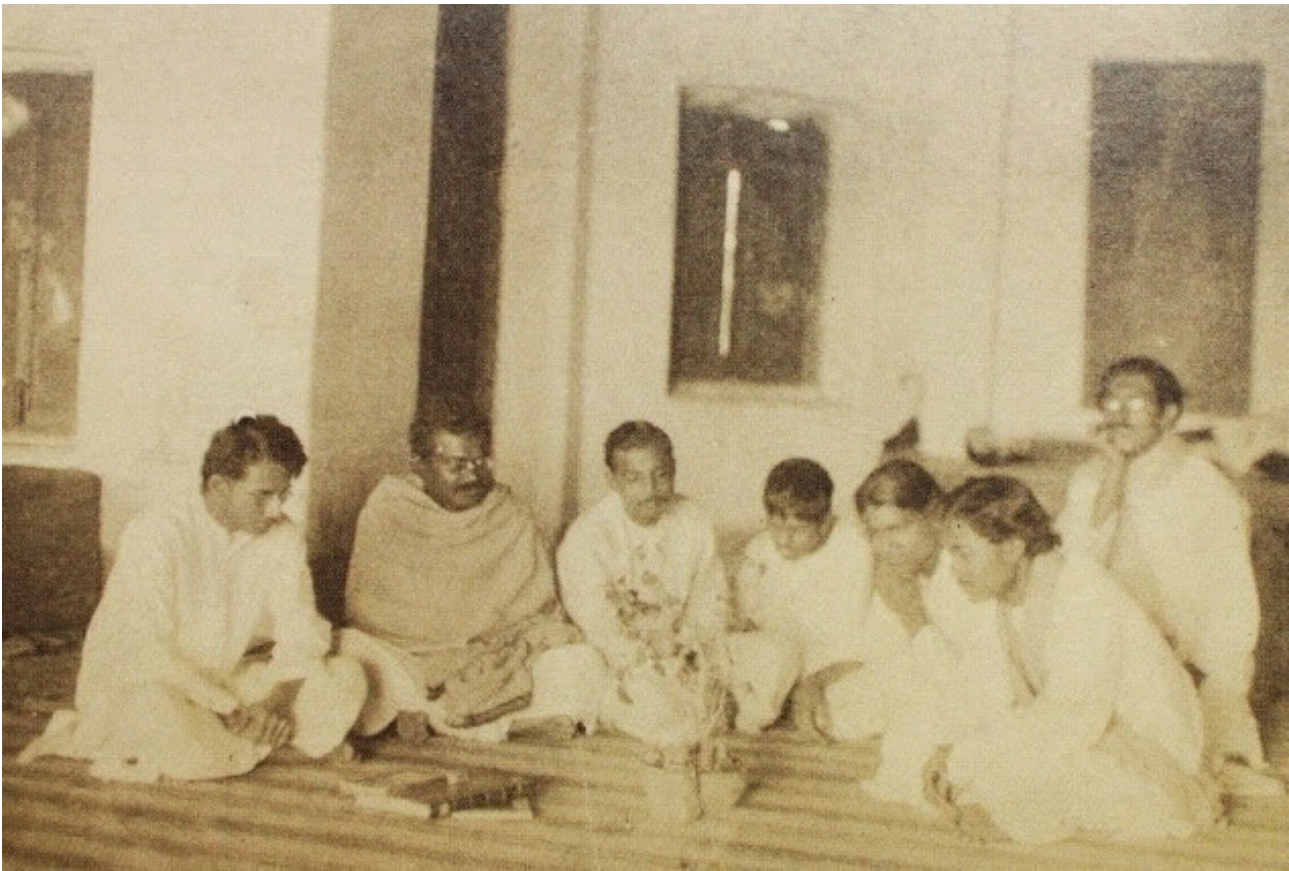


Fig 5: Nandalal Bose with a group of students with the Cheena Bot sapling in the middle. Source: Rabindra Bhavana Archive, VB

Just as the Bramhacharya ashram started under the Chhatim tree, nature and its elements habitually became a key component in the learning process at Kala Bhavana. Benode Behari Mukherjee recalls that their curriculum had neither a measured routine nor specific class hours (Mukherjee, 1984).^{xii} Students were free to loiter around the campus and sketch whoever they came across. Unlike the Govt. Art School in Calcutta (now, Kolkata) where every subject is allotted a specific studio and the academic methodologies associated with it, students in Kala Bhavana found their subjects all around their campus – life study, flora and fauna, animal study, all were studies through coexistence. Here students were encouraged to go beyond the formal visual aspects of anatomy, to understand nature and scope of that coexistence. Mukherjee added, 'It was only when we would translate our learning to art forms, that we would shut ourselves in a room'. The pedagogic thrust of Kala Bhavana was heavily grounded on nature study with seasonal changes providing natural tools for art and environmental engagement.

The fluidity in the methodology of the pedagogic applications and the process of practicing art as a student of Kala Bhavana were not restricted to the ideological nature of intellectual aspirations. The fluidity was also in the spontaneity in the design and distribution of the campus and its character. This often prompted spontaneity interpersonal relationship among teachers, students and often visitors and tourists, breaking certain authoritative barriers of public, private, social and cultural identities of space. I have often encountered groups of tourists walking past the sculpture or design studio to keenly observing the process of making art, where I and my fellow batch mates were working. As opposed to the direction of gaze in a conventional museum scope where objects of art cannot look back, here is this campus, the spectacle of what the public perceives as a heritage university, is beyond the perceptible connotations of its architectural structures and its cluster of murals and sculptures. But it is in the intangible collective knowledge of and from this campus which has been passed on from generation after generation of students and teachers as inheritance, which makes Kala Bhavana as a site of art historical repository.

Campus through its Markers and Makers, as a Museum

Tracking the trajectory of habitual spaces like students hostels, a vital project in which the entire community of Kala Bhavana embarked on, was the project of building Black House in 1938. Initiated primarily as an infrastructural need, faculties of the institution like Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and others along with their students transformed the dearth in resources to an opportunity (Figure 6). Black House stands as one of the most important collective art projects of Kala Bhavana, which started as a functional need, and emerged as a unique pedagogic experiment. Driven by a purpose of occupying the space by the senior art students after its completion, the project cannot be analysed through the method of formalism in art historical analysis. The experiences of engaging with the structure, its rooms and its relief murals are intimate and immersive for a person who occupied that space for a longer period of their life, vis-à-vis a person who approaches the architecture as a heritage spectacle – the latter will not discover the layers of ingenuity in equal measure. Nor will the scope allow them to gauge the expanding scope of perceptibility in methods of viewing and experiencing art.



Fig 6: Black House, Kala Bhavana Campus. Source: Author, 2024

In sync with the geographical location, Black House is a mud house, coated in tar, with a thatched roof – adapted and expanded from the method and material of vernacular architectural design, prevalent in Bengal. The humble structure of the Black House is in complete resonance with the surrounding villages, which diminishes the institutional elitism and bridges the gap of social standing of artistic intervention of the institution. There are about thirty-six relief sculptures done on the walls of the Black House. Among them eleven relief panels are selected portions from the Mattancherry Palace mural ‘Marriage of Shiva’ and dwarfpala figures based on Aihole sculptures. On the northern side of the Black House are relief copies of Egyptian, Assyrian Lion, Indus Valley Bull and examples from Bharhut, and Pallava art traditions. Drawing from this varied range of art historical illustrations, Black House becomes a profound pedagogic paradigm in the hypothesis of place vis-à-vis space and positions ‘museum viewing’ as a discourse for the students and faculty of Kala Bhavana. With Tagore’s goal of institutions being a place of continuous knowledge regeneration, instead of knowledge distribution and instruction, the example of Black House resoundingly demonstrates that the practice of art, and the appreciation of art is not restricted by conditioned viewing, but by active engagement and inclusivity. It breaks the hierarchical cultural authority on art as objects of extreme value, which are ‘out of reach’ for any common visitor or spectator, as established by traditional

museums protocols, and instead positions it at the heart of the community and campus. The polarities here are between a sanitised idea of what should be deemed as a cultural heritage marker and what the way of life was, once. In recent turn of events, it has been administratively determined that the Black House will no longer accommodate art students, since it challenges the preservation of the structure and the relief murals. However, it will still remain to be an art historical marker with the campus, open to public viewing.

In context of living space being active sites of art practice, another significant marker is the Kala Bhavana Boy's hostel murals. Between 1938 and 1949, a series of murals were done inside the Kala Bhavana Boys hostel, which stands opposite to the Kala Bhavana campus. Among many blocks of clustered rooms, three blocks were selected to execute murals on, as class project. The first mural was executed in the veranda of the North Eastern block, under Benode Behari's supervision, in 1939. The mural is an assortment of various indigenous forms and motifs, along with characters from the campus and its surroundings. Spread across the ceiling, walls and columns, the composition is not a coherent one but plays to the quirks of the space. Breaking away from the academic constructs of composition, balance and thematic parity, Benode Behari encouraged multiple participants' perspective with multiple forms, projected on the space. The mural underlines the coexistence of diverse forms and entities, breaking away from the scroll format of traditional mural compositions. These murals go a long way to show how Kala Bhavana was displacing the preeminent methods of engaging with a public space, and blending place of work with place of living as a place of artistic intervention. The murals at Ajanta or Bagh, or the temple sculptures in Orissa or Khajuraho exist in the architectural or spatial scope in which they were created. The practice of separating sculptures from its shrines was a practice which had been regulated through colonial institutions in the pretext of museum collection. Through the larger project of mural paintings, Kala Bhavana restored the artistic energies back to the campus and the larger community of Santiniketan (Figure 7). Due to the rise of urban spaces since the British rule, location of art too had shifted from cultural or ritualistic experiences to gallery and museum spaces. The method of viewing art too was evolving with it, and so did its relation with the mass. Therefore this alternate ambit of site, space, geography, and environment amplified through the practice of mural painting in Kala Bhavana, stands to be of vital significance in the conditions of viewing modern and contemporary art in India.



Fig 7: (Left) Portion of a mural class project under Benodebehari Mukherjee, inside Kala Bhavana Boy's Hostel, depicting the music students of the institution. Source: Author, 2019. (Centre) Demonstration and description of every stage of mural painting evolved and practiced in Kala Bhavana, housed inside Havel Hall. Source: Author, 2019. (Right) Early Kala Bhavana students working on wall frescoes for the Design studio of Kala Bhavana. Source: Rabindra Bhavana, VB.

This larger-than-life scale of art works began to displace smaller formats of painting in the Kala Bhavana campus. The practice of mural paintings in various scale remained a persistent device of activating the odd corners of the campus. Ramkinkar Baij, credibly India's first modern sculptor, inspired by this idiom of scale and monumentality and local resources, created 'Sujata' in 1935, the 'Santhal Family' in 1938, 'Lamp Stand' in 1940, 'The Harvester' in 1943, which are some of the most significant markers of the across the larger campus of Visva Bharati (Figure 8). However, the campus quirks as established through Baij's free standing larger than life sculptures and Benode Bahari Mukherjee, Somanath Hore and K.G. Subramanyan's murals loudly demonstrate that the process of making art, the location of making art, and the viewing of art evolves through a singular platform, which offers a redux to the purpose of making art and connects it more acutely with its environ and its community. In the broader discourse of 'site-specificity' since global postmodernism, the phenomenon of Kala Bhavana campus substantially expands the field of survey for critical interventions.



Fig 8: (left) Raminkar Baij in front of this sculpture of the Santhal Family. Source: Rabindra Bhavana Archive, VB. (right): Mill Call by Ramkinkar Baij, 1956. Source: Author, 2024.

In the argument about 'space' and its formation as a key constituent of Kala Bhavana campus, the most vital contribution was by Surendranath Kar, who shaped a conducive atmosphere for the creating the entire expanse of Santiniketan campus into an expansive and inclusive site through his distinct design aesthetics projected through Santiniketan architecture. Much of modern Indian art history has been written focusing on the formalism of object, than on the experience of it. The kinds of intervention that the artist and student community in Kala Bhavana were exercising require a different approach of analysing its cultural impact. As one of the first faculty members of Kala Bhavana, Kar's involvement with the institution can be tracked along with the progressive shifts in its pedagogic orientation. And Surendranath Kar's most important work has been in projecting and planning the architectural style of Santiniketan.



Fig 9: (left) Department of History of Art on the left and the Department of Design on the right, inside Kala Bhavana Campus. Source: Author, 2024; (right) K.G. Subramanyan's Black and white Mural on the walls of the Design Department, Kala Bhavana. Source: Author, 2024.

Surendranath Kar planned the architectural design of Rabindranath Tagore's houses in Santiniketan called Udayan, Konark, Shyamali, Punashcha, along with Chaitya, Kala Bhavana Nandan, present Patha Bhavana and all the furniture housed in Udayan. Surendranath Kar, Arthur Geddes and Rathindranath Tagore devoted themselves to give shape to Rabindranath's vision of not erasing environmental energies from that of human habituation – a criterion that is acutely reflected across his songs, poems, spiritual and pedagogic philosophy. The unpretentiousness of its architecture that evolved naturally with the flora of the campus, the surrounding *khoai* at its peripheries, the rust earth, and the pedagogic pursuits – all the components together gave shape to the distinct and comprehensive cultural site of Santiniketan, which offers a distinct spectacle prompting the allurements of a heritage site.

Conclusion

The institutional configurations and pedagogic orientations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, defined Art as a new field of study and practice, and radically redefined the identity of the artist and the nature of artistic professions pre-existing in India. Along with it, the system also reconfigured the social standing, purpose and perception of what a work of art projects in modernity. The formation of any institutional identity and authority comes with a certain grade of bureaucracy, which streamlines the scope of experimenting with its objectives and method. Instead it aspires to achieve standardisation in the praxis within a field of study. The fence of bureaucracy becomes particularly detrimental in case of visual and performance art, which has proven to choose conservatism over progressive channels, which conveniently justifies cautious policy configuration for the field of art practice and its multiple stakeholders.



Fig 10a&10b: Examples of artwork display of Kala Bhavana students, using the campus space. Source: Author, 2019 and 2024.

Mooring the argument of this paper on the purview of thinking about an institutional space beyond the schemes of its red tape, and testing it only through its intellectual grounding, I have repeatedly found myself in resonance with Rogoff's propositions:

'If this (art schools) was a space of experimentation and exploration, then how might we extract these vital principles and apply them to the rest of our lives? How might we also perhaps apply them to our institutions? Born of a belief that the institutions we inhabit can potentially be so much more than they are, these questions ask how the museum, the university, the art school can surpass their current functions?' (Irit Rogoff, 2008)

The paper started with a long quote from Rabindranath Tagore, which answers these questions resolutely. The first fifty years of Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan provides an effective argument on the necessity of intellectual vulnerability in creating an institution that which respects knowledge as work in process instead of a benchmark. The open format methodology of seeking a curriculum by responding to its environment, instead of imbibing a distant school of thought and practice, resulted to a vital moment of modernism, which was neither borrowed nor imposed.

Though Kala Bhavana holds an extensively rich collection of Southeast Asian art through its museum collection, here again the purpose and methodology imbibed in the collection of art had been rooted in its pedagogical process of research survey and documentation.

Therefore, this collection is counterintuitive to the projection of institutionalised cultural power, as most conservative spheres of museum making offer. Instead, the repository functions as a reference collection, and upholds a porous campus which manifested the practice and profession of art as a process, instead of it being object-centric. Therefore, art historical intervention in critically engaging with Kala Bhavana demands a broader, and a more compassionate reading of the phenomenon.

Since art education policies in India have been increasingly emphasising on the accountability of deliverables from the education programme, there remains limited room for porosity in its pedagogy. The impacts of the institutional policies are gradually observable in the short-sightedness of the intellectual output of a considerable section of art institutions, across the country. Invoking Rogoff's arguments on institution's potentiality of performing and improvising beyond bureaucratic armature, institutions must adopt avenues through which the practice, process and perception of art is more rooted in its cultural context. Since 1973, Kala Bhavana organises Nandan Mela, the annual art fair inside its campus. Primarily out of the need to raise fund for students in need, the fair have over the years earned a legacy of distinct artistic and intellectual camaraderie among the larger art fraternity across the country. The entire and extended grounds of the campus transforms in to a site of installation and performance, along with multiple stalls with showcase and sell works by teachers and students, for two days in winter. This allows the broader community of Kala Bhavana, which includes former students and teachers to engage in the practice of art making beyond the modules of method and material distinctions. It further stimulates the scope of engaging with the campus space as the site of making and showing art, carrying forward the lineage of its cultural history. On these two days of Nandan Mela, the campus remains open to public access from morning to night, blurring the lines of exclusivity of art and its access. It allows one to engage with the campus beyond the decorum and discipline of an institutional space and transforms into a site of larger public intervention, where the entire process of making, displaying, perceiving, critiquing and selling art can be experienced at the site where it is rooted, creating opportunity for a more inclusive discourse on the potential scope of the future of institutional paradigms.



Fig 11: Installation by students during Nandan Mela in Kala Bhavana campus. Source: Author, 2021

The campus which grew on the grounds of intellectual and spatial response to pedagogic needs for aesthetic projection, liberated artistic identity and in harmony with its environment, without landscaping its elements, stands as a testament to sustainable and time-tested artistic vision, which has its root within an individual experiencing it. From conducting classes and discussion sessions under its many magnificent trees, to displaying class works under the filter of light and shade that they provide and studying their changing forms with the change of seasons, the campus of Kala Bhavana provides an all-encompassing knowledge experience without class and classifications.

Notes

1 See, Visva Bharati Act No. XXIX of 1951 (The statutes of the University, incorporating amendments up to May, 2012)

2 The Santiniketan Bramhachariya Ashram was initiated as a residential school for young students to engage towards a new direction of learning methodology directed towards environmental and social awareness. In contrast to the conventional religious scope and purpose of ashrams or hermitages in south Asia, Santiniketan Ashram was conceived with the sole purpose of inducing an inspiring atmosphere of community living based on the objective of creative and intellectual enrichment, which inculcates the tendency to critically intervene existing but inept systems of cultural and social standing. This nucleus idea of radical learning methodology led to the formation of the primary school of the university called Patha Bhavana, and all other departments of higher learning known as Kala Bhavana (Institute of Fine Arts), Sangit Bhavana (Institute of Music & Performance Art), Vidya Bhavana (Institute of Humanities), Shiksha Bhavna (Institute of Science), Palli Shiksha Bhavana (Institute of Rural Reconstruction), Bhasha Bhavana (Institute of Linguistic Studies) and many more.

3 Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

4 Sriniketan is the Institute of Rural Reconstruction of Visva-Bharati, and was formally established in 1922 at Surul at a distance of about three kilometres from Santiniketan. Leonard Elmhirst, a British philanthropist and agronomist and a close associate of Tagore, was the first Director of the institution. The chief object was to help villagers and people to solve their own problems instead of a solution being imposed on them from outside.

5 The Government School of Art, Calcutta was established in 1854 under the aegis of the British India government. It is now known as the Government College of Art & Craft, Kolkata.

6 Contextual Modernism

7 Vasanta Utsav is the festival to celebrate spring. Briksharopan is the annual ceremony of plating saplings in and around the campus of Visva-Bharati; Halakarshan is the annual ceremony of ploughing the fields for farming; Varsha-Mangal is the annual festival to celebrate the season of Monsoon, since Santiniketan is located in the district of Birbhum, known for its dry red laterite with low alluvium soil.

8 See UNESCO – Executive Summary, p XII

9 Prior to 1929, Kala Bhavana functioned out of various borrowed space within the larger campus of Visva-Bharati.

10 The administrative office of Kala Bhavana has also been named as Nandan building; therefore the previous structure is now called the Old Nandan, for its historical significance.

11 Chhatim tree (*Alstonia scholaris*), holds crucial significance in the cultural milieu of Santiniketan. It is known that Rabindranath Tagore's father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, rested and meditated under this particular tree, and it has since been considered the soul centre of Visva Bharati campus. The place has been since known as Chhatim-tola, which means under the Chhatim tree. Each year every student who graduate from Visva Bharati, is given the digitate leaf of Chhatim, as a reminder of their intellectual roots in the institution.

12 Benode Behari Mukherjee. *Adhunik Shilpo Shikha (Modern Art Education)*. Aruna Prokashoni. 1984 13 Ajanta, Bagh, Konark and Khajuraho are few among the most significant art historical markers of medieval Indian history.

14 Udayan, Chaitya, Konark, Shyamali, Punashcha are all the residential quarters of Rabindranath Tagore, inside the Visva-Bharati campus premises. The architectural planning and furniture designs were conceived in collaboration with Rabindranath Tagore's son Rathindranath Tagore and Arthur Geddes.

15 Khoai in Bengali refers to a geological formation specifically in Birbhum, Bardhaman, and Bankura districts of West Bengal, India and some parts of Jharkhand, India that is made up of laterite soil rich in iron oxide, often in the shapes of tiny hills. This canyon like terrain is caused by wind and water erosion on red laterite soil.[1] Khoai is called part of the India's natural heritage.

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