

*R. Siva Kumar in Conversation with
Regina Bittner and Kathrin Rhomberg*

Shantiniketan: A World University

REGINA BITTNER:

It would be very interesting for us if you could explain a little bit about the Shantiniketan art school—its establishment, the pedagogic concepts, the teaching. We assume that there are a lot of similarities to the Bauhaus.

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Yes, there are certain similarities. In fact it begins with the year of their founding. Kala Bhavan, the art school at Shantiniketan—like the Bauhaus in Weimar—was founded in 1919. They were also guided by similar ideas, at least similar in certain respects. These ideas were broadly developed by Rabindranath Tagore and expanded into a pedagogic practice by Nandalal Bose, whose role in Shantiniketan was like that of Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus. They both developed similar approaches to art education.

KATHRIN RHOMBERG:

Without knowing about each other?

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Yes, without knowing about each other. What was happening in Indian art before this institution came into existence was largely initiated by Rabindranath's nephews Gaganendranath and Abanindranath Tagore. They were involved in what was largely seen as a nationalist revival of Indian art. Rabindranath Tagore also played a part in that cultural resurgence of which the new art movement was a part. But he found their goals somewhat limited, and not in agreement with certain things he felt strongly about. One of the things he believed in was that contact with other cultures was necessary for sustaining creative vitality. The other thing that he felt strongly about was that art should have a robust contact with life around.

KATHRIN RHOMBERG:

Do you mean daily life?

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Yes, contact with daily life, but also with the environment at large. The nationalist school was largely historicist. Their paintings were based on myths and stories gathered from ancient literature; the kind of things on which our image of the past is based. Tagore thought that contact with life around was as important as, or even more important than, awareness of history. This was what he had learned as a writer.

He was a city man and was sent to the villages, against his wish, by his father who wanted him to look after the family estates. But when he came into contact with village life, he came to know another India. And this did him good as a writer. He thought that the artists should also try to come in contact with nature and the larger life around them. He also thought that artists should not remain confined to their studios and that art should play a larger cultural role. He came to it partly by his own thoughts, and partly by what he saw in Japan in 1916. In Japan he found that some of the ideas he was trying to develop were in practice. Japanese artists were keen observers of nature and designed functional objects that were not merely beautiful but added refinement to everyday life.

That was the kind of thing he wished to see in India. He wanted art to move out of the studios into the public space, and into the lives of people. But the artists in Kolkata, who were trying to revive a national identity through contact with historical antecedents, were not very responsive to this idea. This led him to think about starting a new art school which was not to simply teach art but to achieve all of this. So he invited Nandalal Bose, who was one of the students of Abanindranath Tagore—perhaps his most talented student, but also the one who was most responsive to Rabindranath Tagore's ideas—to take charge of the school

and to put these ideas into practice. So that is how the school began in 1919.

It did not begin either with a manifesto or a structured program leading toward an all-encompassing master art as envisaged at the Bauhaus, but it developed, if only gradually, the same kind of amplitude of purpose and practice. Kala Bhavan was primarily an art school, but its teachers and students were encouraged to erase the borders between art and craft, and to be as versatile as possible. Nandalal and Rabindranath worked on this side by side. They realized that colonization had alienated Indians from their traditional visual culture, and what replaced it was not suited to Indian conditions and to the life pattern and needs of the emerging India. Shaping a new visual culture needed artists who were not simply professional artists or individuals committed to self-expression but also designers of various kinds, interested in functional designing and communication.

So Nandalal and his colleagues illustrated books, designed the stage and costumes for plays written by Rabindranath and enacted in Shantiniketan, planned and designed the new secular festivals that Rabindranath introduced in Shantiniketan, and designed textiles, furnishings, and functional objects suitable for interiors, and so on. They also did murals and outdoor sculptures that embellished and transformed public spaces. Taken together, this represented a wide panorama of activities that brought art out from the studio into social spaces and even into domestic life. They got the students involved in all this, each according to his or her skill and inclination.

But it took place in a less organized and programmed way than at the Bauhaus in Germany. For instance, all this did not happen under one roof. While at Kala Bhavan, Nandalal tried to give a broad orientation to his art teaching and get his students involved in the different things I have mentioned. Much of the professional training and production of craft was carried on at Sriniketan, a kilometer away from Kala Bhavan. This center was set up as part of Tagore's rural reconstruction program. Its initial aim was to revivify the rural crafts, but it also tried to introduce new skills and practices. And some of it came from outside India. Besides artists like Nandalal, professional potters from

Germany and Scandinavian weavers were also closely associated with it.

So there were two programs: the art school Kala Bhavan and the craft center at Sriniketan. But there were informal interactions between the two, and they benefited from each other's close presence.

REGINA BITTNER:

Could you please describe how the relationship of Western art and Eastern art was negotiated in this school? That would explain the Austrian art historian Stella Kramrisch's commitment to teaching Western art history.

R. SIVA KUMAR:

It was largely Rabindranath's idea to use Stella Kramrisch's firsthand knowledge of Western art for the benefit of the artists and students at Shantiniketan. Even during the nationalist years he was someone who thought that you ought to have contact with as many cultures as possible—including cultures that are different from yours. He had this very modernist idea that cultures which are very different from yours are important for bringing about innovative transformations within one's own culture. So, in fact, he made it compulsory for everyone to attend her lectures and he himself was present. And sometimes he acted as her translator.

Because of her association with Max Dvořák, Kramrisch on her part was also interested in modern art and played a role, as we now know for sure, in bringing the Bauhaus exhibition to India. Less noticed but equally important is the fact that she brought the formalist approach of the Viennese school to bear on her analysis of traditional Indian art. This was a departure from earlier scholars of Indian art like Ernest Binfield Havell and Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, who had stressed the differences between Oriental and Western art. And Kramrisch's views made an impact on young artists, especially on someone like Benodebehari Mukherjee and a little later Ramkinkar Baij, who were to become two of the most important teachers at Kala Bhavan after Nandalal Bose. This was remarkable because in 1922 very few artists in India were aware of developments in modern Western art.

Caption

- 1 Samiran Nandy, untitled (lessons under mango trees), detail, n.d., photograph

So Kramrisch's lectures were very important from that point of view.

However, it would be wrong to say that Indian artists were unaware of modern developments in Western art before Kramrisch's arrival. We know from William Rothenstein's memoirs, *Men and Memoirs* published in 1931, that he found books on modern Western art in the personal library of Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore when he visited them in 1910. But their interest in Western modernism was more aesthetic than stylistic. Stylistically, they were interested in those areas of Oriental art to which the early Western modernists were also drawn, such as Japanese and Mughal and Persian painting. And they appreciated the same qualities, like pictorial flatness and freedom of spatial articulation, which appealed to Western artists. So their affinities with Western modernism were oblique. To a great extent this was also true of Nandalal Bose.

While Nandalal developed a pedagogy that erased the division between art and craft, seeing art not merely as self-expression but as visual communication, Kramrisch provided Benodebehari with the theoretical apparatus that helped him to relate different styles with different expressive or communicational purposes.

Cross-cultural interest also contributed to Tagore's development as a painter. But this, as I have pointed out, antedated his contact with Kramrisch. He was drawn to "primitive" and Western art just as he was drawn to Japanese art. He looked at this art in books and in museums during his travels. He saw the Armory Show in Chicago in 1913, and this should have given him a good introduction to modern art. He was also familiar with Wassily Kandinsky's writings. Inviting Stella Kramrisch to Shantiniketan was part of this larger interest. And she definitely helped in furthering it and bringing about broader contact with Western art.

If in the beginning Shantiniketan was looking toward Oriental antecedents for inspiration, it gradually became more open to the West. It became a space where the East and the West were looked at with equal interest, though the stress might have differed from artist to artist.

REGINA BITTNER:

That is very interesting: the concept of internationalism made artists get in touch with other cultures to become innovative and creative. There was a similar

attitude at the Bauhaus. Many international artists joined the Board of Masters. It is quite fascinating that they shared the spirit of this cosmopolitanism.

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Yes, that's right. Tagore believed that cross-cultural contacts can spur innovation and revitalize cultures. However, it needs to be clarified that for him knowing other cultures did not mean abandoning the local. For him it was important to know other cultures, but getting to know other cultures did not mean erasing one's own culture or erasing cultural differences and replacing them with internationalism.

He was against cultural insularity. He wanted culture to become an instrument for a people to reach out to the world. And he believed that by knowing other cultures, by knowing each other, we can bring a larger human perspective to our political, economic, and social projects. This was something that the modern world made possible, and we ought to use it. Modernism for him was not about looking alike; it was about freedom of mind, freedom from insular histories that dehumanize others and limit our possibilities. He was working toward a "cosmopolitan local."

REGINA BITTNER:

Let me ask you a question regarding everyday life on the campus of Shantiniketan in the nineteen-twenties. Could you tell us a little bit about what it was like in those days?

R. SIVA KUMAR:

It was very simple. During the twenties Shantiniketan was very rural, with very few modern amenities. Its cosmopolitanism was in its intellectual pursuits, but not in the lifestyle. One of the things Shantiniketan definitely lacked was money. It did not have the financial resources it needed. Tagore refused to accept assistance from the colonial government because, although he kept his institution away from active nationalist agitation, at heart it was both a nationalist and an anticolonial project. It was run with sporadic assistance from native and international well-wishers and earnings from the sale of his books and personal assets. After he received the Nobel Prize, his books were also widely translated. In fact, in the early nineteen-twenties more than a million copies of his books were sold in Germany. The royalty from his translations also went into the financing of the school. But it was seldom sufficient. Old photographs of the

place will show you how simple it was. Most of the buildings you see today were not there in the twenties. There were a few small buildings and large open spaces around them. Most of the classes, especially of the school, were held under trees. Early Shantiniketan had very little by way of material resources, but there were great teachers and scholars, so it was rich in human resources.

REGINA BITTNER:

Where did the students come from?

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Most students came from different parts of India, but a few also came from other parts of the world. As I have said, Tagore kept his institution away from nationalist politics, but many of the students who came to Shantiniketan were nationalist-spirited. As it was not government-funded and thus outside the purview of colonial administration, nationalists who were thrown out of government schools and those who did not want to go to colonial educational institutions found refuge in Shantiniketan. For a long time it was not a degree-giving institution. Later, those who were interested were allowed to sit privately for the Calcutta University examinations. And, even later, it became a regular degree-giving institution.

KATHRIN RHOMBERG:

What was the main teaching language?

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Initially Tagore wanted the school education to be in Bengali, but later English was introduced as a second language. And it remains so even today. Under Tagore, besides the school and the study of cultures, there were three other areas of thrust: the visual arts, the performing arts, and rural reconstruction. And their linguistic needs were different.

REGINA BITTNER:

So rural development was an integral part of the teaching?

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Yes, rural reconstruction was an integral part of Tagore's educational experiments. When Tagore was sent to the villages to administer the family estates, he was charmed by the natural beauty of rural Bengal but also equally pained by the poverty and suffering he

saw. These were also the years of nascent nationalism, and he realized that without addressing the issues of the rural peasants who formed the vast majority of its population, the fight for the political freedom of India would be meaningless. So he began to take interest in improving their life.

So when Tagore started the school at Shantiniketan—by setting it up in rural Bengal and by using nature as an open textbook—he hoped to create an educated class sensitive to nature and to rural life and its needs. Simultaneously, he also wanted to bring the benefit of modern science to agriculture in the villages around his school. For this reason, he sent his son to Urbana, Illinois, in 1912 to learn agriculture. He also found other people who were interested in similar things, especially Leonard Knight Elmhirst. Tagore met him in America where Elmhirst was an agriculture student. He joined Shantiniketan in 1922 and took charge of the rural reconstruction work at Sriniketan. The craft program that we spoke of earlier was part of the rural reconstruction program. The emphasis was on activities, not on teaching; the training in crafts was only a small part of it. The main thing was the regeneration of the rural economy and the improvement of village life. Rabindranath's efforts in this direction, which began in his estates and included rural banking, found an institutional framework at Sriniketan.

KATHRIN RHOMBERG:

Rabindranath Tagore was obviously a pioneer in considering art, craftsmanship, agriculture, and rural life as a united whole.

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Yes, he was a pioneer. In fact his efforts at rural reconstruction and the creation of a peasant cooperative movement actually predated similar efforts by Mahatma Gandhi. He definitely was one of the first Indians to think about such things.

REGINA BITTNER:

Can you tell us something about Shantiniketan today? How does this institution rely on its heritage?

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Well that is a different story altogether. After Tagore's death it gradually moved away from what he had envisaged. In 1940, when Mahatma Gandhi visited Shantiniketan, Tagore placed a letter in his hands which said that *Visva-Bharati* was his most important

creation and that hopefully his countrymen would consider it worthy of preservation and that Gandhi would take it under his protection after Tagore's death. And Gandhi readily accepted this responsibility. After Gandhi was assassinated in 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru thought a permanent way of helping the university would be to bring it under government protection. And it was made a central university in 1951. Nehru and his colleagues were aware of the special aspects of Tagore's institution, but gradually it became assimilated into the national educational system and was governed by the educational policies of the day. Though this brought in economic stability, Shantiniketan lost its independence, which Tagore had wanted to preserve even at the cost of economic hardship.

KATHRIN RHOMBERG:

Does Shantiniketan follow government directives?

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Yes, absolutely. It is not an autonomous institution anymore. The government—through the University Grants Commission, which funds all universities—has set the rules and we have to follow them. These obviously are prompted by political and social expediencies and are not in keeping with the ideals of Rabindranath Tagore. So the uniqueness it once had is gradually disappearing. Some of the old practices, rituals, and festivals remain, but its administrative structure and educational goals have changed.

KATHRIN RHOMBERG:

And the involvement in the rural area, does that still exist?

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Yes, it's still there. Sriniketan continues to exist and has grown a little bigger even. It has an agricultural department, a social work department, a department for extension work in the villages around, and a craft and design center that is in the process of transforming itself into a design school. But it is now more academically oriented and gives degrees; and it trains students who can be employed by the government in its programs for rural and social uplift. It is more teaching-driven than activity-driven. Tagore's emphasis was on work that brought about changes in the life of the people around.

KATHRIN RHOMBERG:

And is the international exchange still going on?

R. SIVA KUMAR:

Yes, it is happening to an extent. But there is a difference in quality and purpose. Shantiniketan does not have ample resources to invite foreign scholars, but scholars and students who get funded do come. In the past, though there was even less money, Tagore's personality and ideas attracted like-minded scholars from different parts of the world to Shantiniketan. There was also the specific goal of promoting cross-cultural understanding, which is different from the exchange of professional knowledge that guides most global exchanges today.

There is also one other thing about this institution that has changed, something that was important for achieving the goals it had set. Tagore saw Shantiniketan as an experiment in education and community-building. And interpersonal contact was important in his plan of things. I personally believe that to achieve what he set out to do, the institution has to remain small. But as a government-funded university, this is not possible. The government is interested in providing education to the masses, which is necessary. But in the process it fails to see the importance of supporting small experimental institutions that have other goals. Under government funding, Visva-Bharati—like every other university—is forced to take more and more students. For instance in its early days, the art college had twenty or thirty students at a time. Now it has five hundred students. So it has grown more than fifteen times. And when you are so big, you can't have that same interpersonal relationship between teachers and students and that sense of community.

The idea of community was very important for Tagore. When he started the school at Shantiniketan in 1901 the model he had was that of the "tapovana," the forest hermitage schools of ancient India, which he saw as a small community of teachers and students living together. When it became Visva-Bharati, a world university, in 1921 he still saw it as a place where the world gathered in a single nest. He still saw it as a small community. Now it has grown so much, it is no longer a close-knit community.

REGINA BITTNER:

This is again a very interesting similarity to the Bauhaus, where 150 students lived close together, outside the city. So the idea was also to form a community.

R. SIVA KUMAR:

And also a kind of culture of its own. When Rabindranath Tagore established his school here, the place was draught-prone barren land. It was transformed into a lush green place by Tagore and some of his associates. It was, in a way, an environment built from scratch.

Alongside this transformation of the environment, he also set himself to building a culture. He wrote songs and plays that made one take note of the landscape; he also created new secular festivals that welcomed the spring, the rains, and the autumn. If you take all this activity together, it amounted to building a culture from scratch within the framework of a community.

Captions

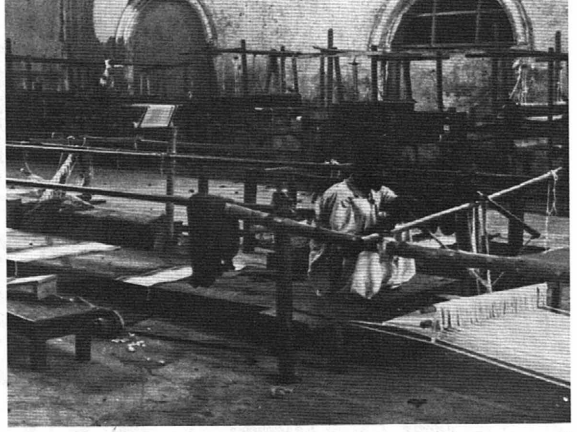
- 2 Photographer unknown, painting class in Silpa Sadan (Sriniketan), n.d., photograph
- 3 Photographer unknown, painting class, n.d., photograph
- 4 Photographer unknown, weaving workshop, n.d., photograph
- 5 Shambhu Shaha, Udayana, 1939, photograph
- 6 Samiran Nandy, untitled (public festival near Shantiniketan), n.d., photograph



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