

RURAL RECONSTRUCTION IN SRINIKETAN: TAGORE'S EXPERIMENT ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Rural reconstruction in Sriniketan started as an experiment of Tagore, and in later years it culminated as a bridge between village and town. Villages in India form a significant portion of the nation, yet in lags in education, exposure, and modernity in terms of development. Tagore wanted to unite people by educating them about cooperation and self-reliance. Another objective of this experiment was to bridge this gap between urban and rural centres. Tagore took help from Elmhirst, a British Agricultural Scientist and others in order to build his dream project. His experiment consists of various aims and objectives. The activities involve proper education, creating awareness about science and technology, sanitation and health, economic development and preservation of old heritage. He also involved some other foreign experts to make this experiment successful. This article aims to trace the history behind the rural reconstruction experiment in Sriniketan, its major objectives towards community development and the various problems identified through this experiment. This article also looks into the various aspects of this experiment, its prospects and its failures.

Keywords: Rural, Urban, Indian villages, Education, Rural-reconstruction, Experiment, Cooperation, Community

Rabindranath Tagore wanted to establish an ideal school, which would converge both Indian and Western cultures. This experiment became successful when he established a school at Santiniketan. Similarly, the rural reconstruction experiment at Sriniketan attempted to bring the Indian villages and cities closer. In India, culture and tradition of villages and towns are very different. The old glory of the villages as a unit of ancient Indian civilization are degrading due to the rapid development of towns and cities. Due to this, a shift from the old cultural values can be observed. This can be seen as ignorance towards the Indian villages, which no doubt forms the major portion of the nation. This endeavour of rural reconstruction will blur the existing differences between the village and the city. He aimed to make the villages self-reliant and to redefine the old cultural values of the past.

Gandhiji also voiced the idea of a Village Republic. Both Gandhiji and Tagore wanted the Indian villages to be united and self-reliant; they wanted to empower the peasants and educate them. However, they differed on certain issues especially like using this idea as a political strategy for mass mobilization to defeat the British imperialism.¹ Another aspect was the implementation of science and technology to achieve development which Gandhiji ignored and Tagore embraced. Tagore believed in innovation and not in isolation and non-cooperation. Science and its proper utilization can only bring new hope in this war-torn world. Tagore believed that Indians are very emotional; the non-violent boycott programmes like discarding foreign goods and setting them on fire in the Gandhian Movement can easily turn violent.²

In 1905, before initiating the experiment in Sriniketan, Tagore had already dealt with the rural problems at Silaidah and Patisar, his family's ancestral estates. Silaidah already had an agricultural bank and a primary school; Tagore further attempted to understand and solve rural problems through the cooperation of the villagers. The rural problems included medical facilities, primary education, public works, indebtedness of peasants and settlement of quarrels. At Patisar, a welfare fund was created for a high school's smooth running and a charitable dispensary. He also encouraged arts, crafts and handicrafts in these two places. However, his

¹ Uma Das Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore a Biography*, 2004 pp. 39-43

² Elmhirst, *Poet and the Plowman*, 1975, pp. 20-21

experiment in these two places failed due to many reasons. The villagers were not motivated enough to take up these experiments in their real life; apart from that, consciousness from ground level and proper education for every individual being was necessary to carry on these ideas. The kind of man power as well as funding was limited due to which his efforts could not meet complete success. Sriniketan is situated in the district of Birbhum, very close to Santiniketan and about three miles from Bolpur railway station. Tagore bought Surul *kuthibari* from Colonel Narendraprasanna Sinha of Raipur. This area in 1923 came to be known as Sriniketan and in the same year the Institute of Rural Reconstruction was set up.

Before starting the programmes at Sriniketan, a detailed survey was done. A varied number of issues came up.³ Water supply for drinking and irrigation was scarce. Due to erosion, less fertile laterite soil and deforestation, this area was an uncultivated wasteland. Since the cultivable land was not sufficient, people did not have enough crops to sustain themselves. The nearest river to Sriniketan is Kopai, which runs dry during the summer.⁴ In 1922, to address these problems, the Department of Agriculture and Village Economics was started by Elmhirst. According to P.C. Lal⁵, the two most pressing problems were identified through this survey. First, during the last hundred years, the village people's communal organization and economic life have been completely upset, and whose present deplorable condition is a natural calamity. Secondly, the educated middle class failed to earn a bare substance in this area due wasteful and uneconomic farming methods. Due to this they drifted towards the town. Migration of people to towns is breaking the village society.⁶ Another problem was that Sriniketan villages were not within Tagore's zamindari, so he did not have much hold on them like he had in Silaidah and Patisar.⁷

L. K. Elmhirst came to India in 1921. He was a British Agricultural Scientist who met Tagore in 1920 at New York, when studying at Cornell. He sincerely believed in Tagore's vision and wanted implement his ideas on ground level; he had previous knowledge on agriculture in India, which further gave impetus to Tagore's ideas. In his book *Poet and the Plowman*, Elmhirst has discussed the work done in Sriniketan. Though his knowledge in agricultural science helped develop the programmes, soon he realized that Tagore's approach towards these problems was more fruitful. In the book, *Poet and the Plowman*, he mentioned that Tagore wanted him to keep his distance between him and the villagers. He was told not to learn Bengali, and one of Tagore's students will always accompany him during such visits in the villages and act as translator. Tagore's view was that if Elmhirst learns Bengali and mixes with the villagers too well then, he will become indispensable and the villagers will never be able to stand up on their own.⁸ Tagore knew the right way to win the hearts of the villagers. There was always a dearth of medical and healthcare facilities in the villages and he understood that solving this problem was the priority for the villagers. Regarding rural reconstruction work Tagore wrote to Elmhirst, "the work which you have started in Surul is a work of creation, for in it you are not following some fixed path prescribed in books, but giving expression to your own creative personality to which even the opposition of obdurate materials ultimately brings help for shaping the structure."⁹ Elmhirst took the help of both government and foreign organizations, and also some of his friends. Through Elmhirst, a paramedic-cum-nurse called Gretchen Green and a malaria expert Dr. Harry Timbres and his wife came to Santiniketan. Timbres also did a course of six weeks at the Ross Field Experiment Station at Karnal and did a survey on malaria in the surrounding villages at Sriniketan.¹⁰ Financial problem was always an issue for the Sriniketan experiment; this problem was solved by Mrs. Willard Straight who came with Elmhirst to India and offered necessary funds so that the experiment can be carried out.¹¹ She promised Rs. 50,000 as annual recurring grant for the experiment.¹² Kim taro Kasahara from Japan was a woodwork expert¹³ and carried out new experiments to grow fruits and vegetables and also

³ P. C. Lal, *Reconstruction and Education in Rural India*, 1932, pp. 53-60

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sudhir Sen, *Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction*, 1943, pp. 57

⁷ Ibid., pp.105

⁸ Elmhirst, op. cit. pp. 18

⁹ Tagore's letter to Elmhirst, 18 April 1923 cited in Uma Das Gupta, op. cit. pp. 100

¹⁰ Visva Bharati News, July 1932, Volume 1, number 1, pp. 2

¹¹ Sudhir Sen, op. cit. pp. 102

¹² H. B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, 2021, pp. 234

¹³ Kumkum Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore Adventure of Ideas and Innovative Practices in Education*, 2014, pp.82

attempted to introduce new crops in the Sriniketan nursery.¹⁴ Dr. Harry Timbre arrived in 1932 and gave great impetus to the health initiative.¹⁵

Tagore went to Russia in order to understand the education system in that country. He observed that within a brief period, they have entirely altered the living conditions of people through education. They have paid particular attention to three things- education, agriculture and technology and dedicated their life to this wholeheartedly. These three elements have achieved wholeness in terms of mind, power to work, and sustenance. Like in India, the majority of people in Russia are depended on agriculture.

Nevertheless, unlike Russia, the farmers of our country are ignorant and incapable on the one hand and on the other, are also deprived of education and power. To some extent, their dependence is on tradition, which he follows obediently but cannot surpass it throughout his life.¹⁶ He has further written that few years back, condition of both Russian and Indian population used to be similar; however, this situation changed rapidly in their country where as we are still drowning and struggling at the same place of darkness.¹⁷ In British India, there was no free primary compulsory education, however, in 1930, Primary Education Act was passed in Bengal. This act was to some extent implemented in towns and cities but not yet in the rural areas.¹⁸

In the Sriniketan experiment, emphasis on education, village welfare and economic boost can be noted. As far as the objectives and programmes are concerned, involvement with the villagers and cultivators was the first step; in order to do so, friendship and affection were necessary. It was their part to identify the problems. Finding a solution to a problem was not limited within a classroom; it was further forwarded to the villagers so that they could apply it practically. Apart from these, necessary steps were taken in terms of health and sanitation, usage of resources and credit, proper marketing of their product to fetch good money. Other efforts were teaching them advanced methods of agriculture and livestock keeping, dairy, poultry, introduction of new crops, better seed selection, use of proper implements and working cooperatively, and mutual understanding and help. Along with improvements in agricultural methods, Sericulture and Fishery was also introduced later.¹⁹ Importance was also given to industrial growth since this region was mainly a one-crop agricultural region and a secondary way of income was required for the economic growth. Emphasis on handicraft, weaving, pottery, tannery, leathercraft, carpentry, bookbinding, printing, embroidery and textiles were given.²⁰ Measures were taken not only in order to educate the villagers but also the students and staffs were encouraged to participate in this endeavor wholeheartedly. The *Brati-Balaka* Organization was an important part of the rural reconstruction programme. Young boys from the villages formed scout troops and served the villages. They were trained and actively cooperated in crisis. According to P.C Lal²¹, from extinguishing village fires to burning of soiled bedclothes during the cholera epidemics; they always stood by and never considered it as polluted or contaminated. During Poush Mela, they perform crowd management tasks, mobilized medical aid, cleared jungles and dug up drains.²² According to K. Bhattacharya²³, the programmes of Sriniketan experiment were four-fold, i.e., a) research, b) education, c) service and d) commerce. Several organizations like *Siksha-Satra*, *Lok Siksha Samsad*, *Shilpa Bhavana*, *Siksha Charcha*, etc were also set up. The education department consists of two branches, i.e., *Siksha Satra* and *Siksha Charcha Bhavana*.²⁴ *Siksha Satra* was a school for village boys belonging to different castes and *Siksha Charcha Bhavana* was a teacher's training centre for village teachers where the curriculum was prescribed by the government.²⁵ The formation of Cooperative Societies like Cooperative Credit Societies and Cooperative Health Societies in Sriniketan helped the villagers from indebtedness and diseases.²⁶ It has also brought people from different castes and creeds together. A cooperative bank was also set up. This bank was set up with the help of Tagore's Nobel prize money.²⁷ This bank provided

¹⁴ Kathleen M. O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet as Educator*, 2012 pp.290

¹⁵ Kumkum Bhattacharya, op. cit. pp.84

¹⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, *Russia-r Chithi*, 2 October, 1930, Number 6, Rabindra Rachanabali, Volume 10, 1989

¹⁷ Ibid. Number 1

¹⁸ P. C. Lal, op. cit. pp. 34

¹⁹ H. B. Mukherjee, op. cit. pp.237

²⁰ Ibid. pp. 239

²¹ P. C. Lal, op. cit. pp.126

²² Kumkum Bhattacharya, op. cit. pp.85

²³ Ibid., pp. 82

²⁴ Sudhir Sen, op. cit. pp. 106

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ P. C. Lal, op. cit. pp.125-26

²⁷ Uma Das Gupta, op. cit. pp. 38

loans to the cultivators to pay off their debts to the zamindar. This bank also played a vital role in the export of the rice produced in the local areas since it 'coincides with the jurisdiction of the Visva-Bharati Central Cooperative Bank which covers the Police station of Bolpur, Nanoor and Illambazar'²⁸. More than seven hundred credit societies were affiliated to the bank and villagers were able to hold their own banking account.²⁹ The Medical Section organized the village health societies that took preventive measures against deadly diseases and promoted self-help. Sanitation and health improved in the villages and attention towards women health was also given. Mahila Samitis were also formed to create awareness among women regarding maternity and child welfare.³⁰ However, there was insufficient female staff and more attention towards organizing women societies and their training was needed in the field of sanitation, hygiene, child welfare and maternity.³¹ The surrounding area of Sriniketan was malaria stricken and its eradication was the priority before introducing any other work here. The jungles and overgrowth were cleared and from Sriniketan other sanitation work like spraying of Kerosene into *dobas* and pits were organized. In 1932, a self-supporting dispensary scheme was prepared and in 1933, three Health Co-operatives were organized at Ballavpur, Goalpara and Bandgora.³² In order to boost the economic condition and to involve the villagers, *Magh Mela* is organized in the month of February. This was supposed to give an economic push for the villagers. Other important festivals like *Hala karshana* and *Varsha Mangal* were organized to make people understand the importance of environment and its preservation for a better future.³³

Conclusion

It is evident that developing Indian villages and maintaining their integrity is exceptionally essential to growing as a nation. The sustenance of an experiment depends on a lot of factors like leadership, funding and incorporation of new ideas. The Sriniketan experiment was going on well but after the death of Tagore, it faced a setback. Due to lack of funding, the experiment could not expand to other villages apart from the ones near Sriniketan. There was also a lack of cooperation and understanding between the students and researchers and the villagers. Elmhirst left after few years, which made the experiment weak. The villagers lacked exposure and were too much attached to their tradition and culture. The age-old caste problems and superstitions still loom more prominently in the Indian villages. Language problem also poses a communication gap especially in tribal areas. According to K. Bhattacharya³⁴, a series of incidents happened after the death of Tagore; funding became a real issue since the spotlight shifted towards India's independence from the colonial rule; secondly, in the year 1951, Visva-Bharati became a central university by an Act of Parliament which imposed a new set of rules and regulations. Though new rules and regulations slightly changed the overall rural development work, a number of new possibilities also emerged. When Visva-Bharati became a central government recognized university, it opened its door to numerous students from different parts of India and abroad.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the population of Bolpur-Santiniketan increased which no doubt opened new opportunities for the local markets. With rapid urbanization in India, the relationship of the towns and cities with villages are also changing. People living in villages now have various opportunities which were not available during Tagore's time. After independence, the Five-Year Plans have incorporated various financial aid to agriculture and the nature of governance has also changed since then. Presently, the institutions at Sriniketan are *Palli Samgathana Bibhaga* (Institute of Rural Reconstruction) and *Palli-Siksha Bhavana* (Institute of Agriculture). These institutions and the departments under them are academic and research-oriented. This Sriniketan experiment indeed changed the outlook of the village community and its function, however, this experiment was not implemented on a larger scale throughout India. The concept of mutual help still by large a distant concept.

²⁸ Visva Bharati News, July 1932, Volume 1, number 2, pp.13-14

²⁹ P. C. Lal, op. cit. pp. 126

³⁰ H.B Mukherjee, op. cit. pp. 243

³¹ P. C. Lal, op. cit. pp.126-27

³² H.B Mukherjee, op. cit. pp. 242

³³ Sudhir Sen, op. cit. pp.108

³⁴ Kumkum Bhattacharya, op. cit. pp. 86-87

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