

THE BACKGROUND

For its better understanding, the Committee attempted an encapsulation of Visva-Bharati's origins which can be summarized as follows :

In 1863, 'Maharshi' Debendranath Tagore, the Poet's sagacious father, deeply influenced by Raja Rammohun Roy, bought twenty bighas of red laterite earth from a zamindar in Birbhum. He had, earlier, found meditative peace amongst the *chhatim* trees there. Building a house on the site, which he named 'Santiniketan', Debendranath dedicated, in 1888, by a trust deed, this acquisition of his for the establishment of an Ashrama. Householders from all backgrounds were to be enabled to meditate there. The deed also envisaged a school, a library and, with a sensitivity towards the people of the area, an annual fair where the villagers could sell their produce. And so, in a sense, 'Santiniketan' was begun by the Poet's father. Rabindranath gave to his father's ideal a shape and definition by starting, in 1901, the 'dream' school.

This, then, was the seed of the future VB – a school with no more than five students – of whom Rabindranath's son, Rathindranath, was one and no less than five teachers – in the perfect ratio of 1:1.

Within the Ashrama, therefore, rose this school called Brahmacharyasrama (later re-named Brahmacharya Vidyalaya). Rooted in the Vedic simplicity of a 'tapovan' it was also remarkably modern, with three of the five teachers being Christian, two Roman Catholics and one an Englishman named Lawrence. The school was a repudiation of the stereo-typing form of education introduced by the colonizers of an ancient land. Debendranath's monotheistic beliefs and Rabindranath's own evolving philosophy placed the school at the head of, and even ahead of, the new age that was dawning on India.

With his creative genius extending to new and newer horizons, Tagore's stature received world recognition in the Nobel Prize of 1913. This was as much a tribute to his *Gitanjali* as it was to his universalism that was receiving practical, tangible, visible shape in Santiniketan. Inexorably, his work led, in 1918, to preparations for a Centre of Indian Culture at Santiniketan. Tagore wrote : 'The Ashrama, with its vidyalaya, had now advanced to the point where it could begin to reach out further towards the ideal of a comprehensive Indian culture...'

That ideal, in fact, looked well beyond India. With a progression as natural and fascinating as that of a seed to planthood and a wide-branched tree, Visva-Bharati grew. Tagore said at its inauguration on 23 December, 1921 : "[Visva-Bharati] will not be a mere school; it will be a pilgrimage. Let those coming to it say, oh what a relief it is to be away from narrow domestic walls and to behold the universe."

VB was to attempt the unprecedented : it was to be rooted in the soil of Birbhum, of Bengal, of India but it was to branch out to the skies of the world. VB was to have as its base a school and, without too elaborate a vestibule, was to become a centre for the cultivation of the fine arts and for research at a high plane, with the bringing together of the East and the West as its aim. Tagore appropriately chose for VB's motto the Vedic line : *Yatra visvam bhavatyeka nidam* – 'Where the world makes its home in a single nest.' Tagore also saw the need for an initiative that would relate his vision to the living conditions and realities of the people amidst whom Santiniketan was being located, and Sriniketan emerged.

One hundred and five years later, VB's origins can be clearly traced to its ideals from the institutions that now function – or try to – as its 'four pillars' :

- (i) *Education for children* as symbolized by its schools – Patha Bhavana, Siksha Satra and Uttar Siksha Sadan;
- (ii) *Nurturing the Fine Arts* as embodied in the Kala Bhavana and Sangita Bhavana;
- (iii) *Research*, as conducted in the under-graduate, graduate and post-graduate programmes at Vidya Bhavana (for Arts) and Siksha Bhavana (for Science); and
- (iv) *Rural Reconstruction*, as personified in the cluster of institutions at Sriniketan.

All four were, in Tagore's vision, to cohere into a national and international salience, inviting students and teachers from outside Bengal and India.

Even in Tagore's lifetime, not to speak of the contemporary situation, there were other Pathashalas in India, other colleges and even specialized centres for study in the arts as also village-based programmes. How, then, was Tagore's initiative unique? It was so because Tagore wanted Santiniketan to become 'the guest house of India' where scholars and teachers from far and near would come, trying – in his words – 'to see truth' and to enable a meeting of the East and the West. Santiniketan was to be 'our very own' and yet 'unique', 'familiar' and yet 'new'. It was to be different like a *raga* made of the scale of notes that are on everyone's lips, but in a composition none has heard before.

In the pages that follow, the evolution, progression and regression of VB will tell its own tale. But at this point of the narration it is important to say that a year before his death, a despondent Tagore appealed to Mahatma Gandhi, through a letter dated 19 February 1940, to take a closer interest in VB than he had done before as 'Visva-Bharati is like a vessel carrying the cargo of my life's best treasure and I hope it may claim special care from my countrymen for its preservation.' Gandhi replied the same day saying 'You may depend upon my doing all I can in the common endeavour to assure its permanence' adding, 'Visva-Bharati is a national institution. It is undoubtedly also international'.

So, anxiety about Visva-Bharati's future beset Tagore himself, some six decades before our times.

'Special care' and 'preservation' are crucial words for Tagore to have used. Independence was seven years away when Tagore wrote those plangent words, as was, roughly, Gandhi's assassination. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who had said once, 'I have learnt more from Rabindranath Tagore than even from Mahatma Gandhi', and Education Minister Maulana Azad decided, in 1951, in the light of their perceptions, that this special protective care would be best vouchsafed by means of an Act of Parliament. This was to make it, formally, what it always had been, an institution of national importance. But it also made it a Central University. In the wake of its many-sided growth in subsequent years as such a University also followed, alas, many woes.

Speaking on the Central University status being given to it by the Visva-Bharati Bill in 1951, Prime Minister Nehru had said : 'We have looked upon this not only as a very *great* institution but as a very *special* and *unique* institution and we are particularly anxious that it should *not fall into the rut* of other universities.'

The "state of affairs" of VB in 1951 was not such as to cause particular alarm. And the purpose of the Bill was simple : Giving to the University financial and administrative stability within the evolving ideals of higher education in India. Nehru was, however, clear that the Visva-

Bharati Act should include measures that will prevent it from typifications and, to use his own phrase, 'regimentation'.

But contrary winds blew over Santiniketan since then.

It will be 105 years in December 2006 since the Ashrama School came into existence, 85 years since Visva-Bharati commenced functioning and 55 years since that Bill became Act XXIX of 1951, making Visva-Bharati an institution of national importance and investing it with the official 'uttariya' (ceremonial scarf) of a Central University, as distinct from the universities run by the Government of West Bengal.

And we hear it said regularly that Santiniketan, today, is in deep decline.

When Nehru used the expression "not fall into a rut", was his anxiety pessimistic or was it prophetic?

The Paridarśaka, through the phrase *present state of affairs*, has answered that question indirectly. If, for something that was meant to be unique, routinization is a form of 'rut', Visva-Bharati has that affliction. If for something that was meant to be universalist, localization is a 'rut', VB has the affliction. If something that was meant to be the 'world's nest' is today a tangle of broken twigs from which birds of no distinct plumage or song take wing, VB has that affliction.

The Committee studied Visva-Bharati's campus, the Patha Bhavana, the Colleges and other Bhavanas and Sriniketan severally, against Visva-Bharati's original aim. Its perceptions of the present scene at Santiniketan and Sriniketan are described in the following pages.

A. Beholding Santiniketan

Visiting Santiniketan at any time of the year brings its rewards. If it is session-time, the bustle is a sight to behold; if vacation-time, the quiet is a balm.

The Committee visited it, as a team, from 22 to 24 June, 2006. Individual members of it also did so, separately, on other dates, over 2006. Yet, seeing it, collectively, under the Paridarśaka's mandate was a different experience.

The Upacharya, on the team's collective visit in June 2006, was Professor Sujit Kumar Basu. He and the Registrar and others responded to our questions most patiently, as they showed us around. It was a singular pleasure to interact with the Visva-Bharati students, especially the younger students in the school. Their spirit, brightness and vivacity were striking. The Patha Bhavana and Kala Bhavana were a hive of activity.

The first thing the Committee realized was that Visva-Bharati's 'campus' needed to be better defined, in terms of maps, perceptions and existing definitions.

Next, the Committee could see, like anyone visiting it, that 'Santiniketan', to use that expression loosely, including in it the 'campus', the Ashrama area and the *Uttarayana* complex, was in debilitation. Buildings showed their age. The older ones among them beautiful and yet simple, designed by the Poet's son Rathindranath and the artist Surendranath Kar, in their pale yellows and off-whites, wore a lost look, the plaster, the paint and fixtures calling for urgent attention. Visva-Bharati's buildings seemed to be in need of more, much more, than what is called 'regular' or 'annual' maintenance. We could see they needed reconstructive and restorative care, building by building, wall by wall, so as to bring each structure back to life and health. Since almost every building had distinctive artistic features, apart from architectural individualities, sensitive handling was called for – and urgently. Some of them, like *Santiniketan Griha*, Patha Bhavana, Hindi Bhavana and Malancha – to name a few – had paintings on the wall which needed urgent and expert attention.

The Upacharya and others showed us, with pride but also with conservationist concern, the jewel-like *Mandir* or *Upasana-griha* built in 1891 by Maharshi Debendranath Tagore for the worship of 'The Universal God of All'. Another structure is unlikely to exist anywhere in the world with the fragile exquisiteness of this *Mandir*. A really strong gale would suffice to bring it down. This structure and some others (of which, later) we felt qualified for institutional expertise, whether ASI, INTACH, The Aga Khan Foundation, or any other.

The insides of some of the buildings we saw did not compensate for the exterior either. Users have to be carers, which did not seem to be the case.

The Committee found the *Uttarayana* complex, at first glance, to be well-tended, almost manicured. *Shyamali*, for all its rudimentary earthen make, too seemed sound of structure. *Konark* and *Punascha* and *Udichi* were all as the Gurudeva had known them to be, though in different stages of health.

The Tagore archives in *Vichitra* showed the conjoint presence of technology and reverence. Seeing the images and sounds, original manuscripts and paintings bearing Tagore's impress was a moving experience. The passage-way, through which the thieves of the Tagore memorabilia including the Nobel medallion must have carried their loot of heritage on March 25 2004, was a profoundly sad experience. 'Will the objects be found one day?' was an unasked question on our minds. 'Is Visva-Bharati now safe from future thieving?' was a question we did ask.

Thieving takes away what belongs to another and is evil. There is another – reverse – activity that is not evil, only callous: littering. We saw litter on the public spaces between the various buildings at Visva-Bharati and Santiniketan. For all their veneration for Tagore and admiration for Santiniketan, visitors and users drop around randomly their plastic bags, sachets, mini-cups, silver foil packets of chips and gutka. Conservation and conservancy are meant to be close cousins; they are not so here.

We were told that as some of these spaces did not ‘belong’ technically to Visva-Bharati, the responsibility for their upkeep and for the clearance of the garbage belonged elsewhere or – nowhere. Mahatma Gandhi had said on his very first visit to Santiniketan in 1915 – *Our stay in Santiniketan taught us that the scavenger’s work would be our special function in India.* (Autobiography, 1928). So we cannot blame our times entirely. But Visva-Bharati and Santiniketan ought to be models of cleanliness and conservancy, no less than of culture. And Visva-Bharati does not have to go far to see how to do it : the *Uttarayana* complex itself holds an object lesson in impeccable maintenance.

B. The Physicality Of It –

Visva-Bharati’s infrastructure is now worse than before although – or perhaps *because* – there are more buildings. The HLC cannot but recall Prime Minister Nehru’s words, while speaking on the VB Bill, 1951, “...We should not spend our money on a large number of brick structures as we unfortunately still do in making our buildings, whether it is educational buildings or other buildings, and have little time left to carry on the work in those buildings.”

The new hostels look either commonplace at the best and clumsy at the worst, not because they are of poor design but because they are poorly maintained. The campus is not really cared for although, more recently, a coat of ephemeral paint may be seen on some of the hostel and administrative buildings.

Visva-Bharati has approached the Ministry for Human Resources for a grant of several lakhs for more hostels, including an International Students’ Hostel (ISH). According to a *Times of India* report of 19 April, 2006 VB received Rs. 21.5 crores, no less, as a grant from the UGC, in addition to the Rs. 17 crores it has received under the 10th Plan. According to this report, the then Upacharya said that the additional funds will be spent on “strengthening the infrastructure starting new faculties and maintaining heritage objects.” These are, of course, laudable aims.

But the Committee has not failed to note that while plans are afoot to strengthen the infrastructure, an International Students’ Hostel built more than a year ago had not been occupied

even as of the summer of 2006. At the time of the recently concluded Indian History Congress at Santiniketan that building had been considered for occupation as it was lying empty but was found unsuitable because its doors and windows had been affected – already – by termites. When that is the situation, the Committee could not but wonder if building new structures was the best road forward.

The Committee deemed it advisable to ask VB to ‘hold’ any committals of the UGC grant to new construction projects until the Committee had completed its exercise. It also asked VB to ‘hold’ all new appointments to vacant positions.

In the ‘Comprehensive Perspective Plan for the Development of VB During 2005-2025’ prepared by VB in May 2005, (CPP) there seems to be a clear intention to go in for major construction and expansion programmes mirroring IIT and IIM campuses.

Sub para 3.3.D of the CPP says “a properly equipped 1000-seated auditorium will be built in the campus. Besides, museums and archives for display and scientific storage of valuable assets in possession of VB, a science centre, a modern sports complex complete with a gymnasium and swimming pool, a senate hall, etc, will be put up to meet the bare necessities of curricular and co-curricular life on campus.”

The Committee asked itself : Is miming IIT and IIM campuses the right trajectory for VB? The HLC had no intention of romantically time-warping Santiniketan in a grove of *jhau*, *jam*, and *sal* trees within an earthen building covered by a *madhobi* creeper and linked to the nearest human habitations by a red-earth road. But was a furious construction of a cement jungle with steel and chrome the right alternative?

C. Visva-Bharati’s Administration and The Visva-Bharati Act, 1951

Curiously enough the idea of this huge Institution threatens me with a prospect of loneliness – it will give me responsibility, but no companionship.

- Rabindranath Tagore (1921)

The HLC noted that the VB administration, headed by the Upacharya and assisted by the Registrar, though physically situated in Santiniketan, could still seem to be at some distance from the faculty and the students. Likewise, the office of the Upacharya – perhaps because it was pre-eminent – seemed rather lonesome. For a campus-University of the size of VB, this was not only unfortunate but surprising. The HLC recommends that the frequency and the nature of interaction

between the senior officers of the University, including the Adhyakshas, both in Santiniketan and Sriniketan, should be qualitatively improved, a procedure that depends entirely on the personality and the working methods of the VC and the Registrar.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri said in 1987 that Santiniketan abounded in “men who wanted to be epiphytes on Tagore”. It can be said of post-Tagore Santiniketan that it continues to count among its population those who want to be seen as ‘close to the Upacharya’ and therefore as the ‘power behind the seat’ – a contemporary version of the ‘epiphytes’ Niradbabu spoke of. This does not help the Upacharya.

The Committee noted that the personnel recruited, over the last 10 years mostly comprised people from the surrounding semi-rural/rural belt. Given the employment situation, this is understandable. VB has become the largest employer in that area and there was a general conception among the people in the area that VB was an ‘industry’ – the only ‘industry’ in Bolpur – where they could find jobs. Localism holds Visva-Bharati in an umbilical grip.

The local recruitments are ‘permanent’. But the process of attrition needs to be used to right-size the University and to systematically monitor new appointments to key positions, with a view to improving quality. The Committee realised that it was essential that the Selection Committees did not appoint pre-meditated candidates from within the region. If appointees are carefully selected under an open and transparent system as befits a Central University, the departments and the Bhavanas would benefit from better staffing and do better than what they are presently doing.

The HLC also learnt that ‘unionism’ had created bottlenecks in the way of disciplinary rules and regulations, be it classroom attendance by students, teachers and office-attendance by employees, or the general work culture of staff members.

The HLC could see a gulf between the office of the Upacharya (that was just then being vacated) and the teaching faculty, with the latter feeling they were inadequately represented on the Executive Council and, generally, not being given their due.

Recommendations for addressing these issues through amendments to the Act and Statutes are being made in later sections of the Report.

D. Visva-Bharati’s Finances

VB’s budget profile, for the last five years shows the odds set heavily against ‘Plan’ expenditure which strengthens teaching and learning, as opposed to Non-Plan (salaries, mainly):

Amount (in lakh Rs.)

Years	Grant		Expenditure	
	Plan	Non-Plan	Plan	Non-Plan
2000-2001	85.00	3503.00	135.69	3768.18
2001-2002	529.00	3769.17	415.12	3707.75
2002-2003	325.00	4583.46	295.18	4098.77
2003-2004	325.00	4871.43	45.00	4572.95
2004-2005	162.50	4151.14	230.33	4851.13

The funds are placed at Visva-Bharati University's disposal by the UGC. Specific project-based and research-based grants are also received from various sources from time to time and are separate.

The University also gets some Special Grants from UGC. Allocations for Special Grant are utilized to meet expenditure intended under the Special Grant.

The HLC noted that VB was no exception to the increasing trend in our universities and institutes of higher learning to spend the overwhelming part of its budget on salaries rather than on academic and relevant activities.

Our recommendations in this report for the restructuring of the University will call for substantial additional funds, both of a recurring nature and also for the improvement of its physical facilities, buildings and infrastructure through one-time renewal grants and an augmentation of its recurring budget.

It is not required for the HLC to quantify the financial implications of its recommendation. Depending on the acceptance of the HLC's recommendation, the competent authorities will have to work out the recommendation's budgetary implications. Needless to say, the HLC has been ambitious for VB's future but not in a prodigal manner.

As is evident from the Statement on page 18, the Plan Expenditure for the strengthening of Visva-Bharati's academic sinews and its academic and research development compares poorly against the Non-Plan expenditure on salaries, pensions, fuel charges, electricity charges, etc.

The HLC would like to make the recommendation that the VB should aim to break out of that 'rut' – to use Prime Minister Nehru's phrase – and seek to earmark 20% of its recurring budget to promote academic and research activities, specifically for its library, laboratories and teaching aids.

E. Visva-Bharati's Students

The HLC found VB students to have the aspirations and enthusiasms of their counterparts elsewhere. But they also showed signs of the despondence seen on other campuses. These can be ascribed, in part, to non-involvement in the life of the campus as a whole. The routinisation that the HLC noticed in the various Bhavanas of the University had seeped into the students. Certain recommendations in this regard follow later.

The total number of students enrolled at Visva-Bharati – its schools, colleges and all Bhavanas put together, in November, 2006 is 7111. Of these male students are 3688 and female students are 3423.

By the standards of Indian universities, Visva-Bharati cannot be described as having an unmanageable student population.

The difficulty, if it may be so described, is not about numbers – the teacher-student ratio is 1:13 for Visva-Bharati as a whole, including its schools.

The 'problem' about VB's students is that admissions upto at least 50% and sometimes more, have been largely non-competitive and predominated by 'internal' candidates who did not always have to take admission tests, oral or written. This trait has been *on the increase* in recent years. Only a small percentage of outsiders now get admission because the seats have been filled up already with the 'internal' aspirants.

VB is now not a '*visva nidam*' as much as a '*campus nidam*'. This, the Committee felt, has to change with a phased-out progressive reduction in the ratio of insiders in future student admissions.

The Kala Bhavana, the Committee found, was a notable exception, admissions there being open and competitive, which was one reason why it was doing better, pedagogically, than the other Bhavanas.

F. Its Pedagogy

The HLC's attention was drawn to a report in *The Times of India* (February 9, 2006) that referred to new initiatives for teaching “nano-technology, Japane, Persian, bio-technology” in the same sentence. This seemed to reflect not a liberal stance for inter-disciplinary mutuality and mobility, but a blurring of VB's pedagogic identities. Is VB meant to be part IIT, part IIM, part Kalakshetra, part School of Language Studies and part JNU?

Did the fact that Tagore consciously and conspicuously kept certain fields such as medicine, engineering and law out of the ambit of VB have a logic to it? Should VB, in today's situation ignore that logic and, bring in those and similar areas?

VB, we noted, had recently inaugurated a programme for management studies in Kolkata. Situated as it is on the B.T. Road, facing the Indian Statistical Institute, this Campus looks like a pitiful attempt at ‘keeping up with Jones's’ – a topsy-turvy way of maintaining VB's *uniqueness*. The HLC received an ‘Appeal’ from distinguished persons including Smt. Asoka Gupta, Shri Chidananda Dasgupta, Professor Barun De, Professor P. Lal, Shri Anath Nath Das and Smt. Aparna Sen, asking it to stop reported plans for the opening of a ‘VB campus in Kolkata’. *The Times of India* had reported that Kolkata had been chosen “as the place to set up our second campus since it becomes very difficult for students from across the country to commute to Santiniketan”.

The HLC could not but see the point made by the signatories that scholars want to come to Santiniketan *because* it is situated where it is and not in a metropolis.

The CPP, we saw, also sought to create new Chairs in order to “attract” persons of eminence from outside. Could ‘Chairs’ bring persons of distinction to Santiniketan or the opportunity for academic discourse in an unusual ambience? VB needs visiting faculty of good quality and (when from overseas) an interest in India. Such teachers are not difficult to find.

G. Sriniketan

Even as Tagore set up Kala Bhavana and Sangita Bhavana for “cultivating the senses and emotions through the regular teaching and practice of the fine arts”, Sriniketan arose to create a bond that he saw as being vital : between the rural and the global, *Palli* and *Visva*.

The *Karma Samiti*’s report of 1973, pointed out what is well known, but bears repetition : “Gurudev Tagore was also deeply interested in the problems of reconstruction of our villages and village communities.”

Sriniketan came into existence as “a pioneer in rural reconstruction activities”, becoming an integral part of VB as a truly humanistic education demands the cultivation of both a broad imagination and the widest sympathy. This required, for Tagore, an active spirit of service towards one’s immediate neighbourhood, the village, to find space within the broad compass of the same institution for two activities which have been conventionally regarded as lying poles apart, namely, an active concern for the village next to your doorstep and also scholarly and systematic study and research of cultures Eastern and Western with the objective of strengthening the foundations of world unity.

In a letter to Leonard Elmhirst (1893-1974), dated 19 December 1937, Tagore wrote, “Our people need more than anything else, a real scientific training that can inspire in them a courage of experiment...Sriniketan should be able to provide its pupils an atmosphere of rational thinking and behaviour which alone can save them from stupid bigotry and moral cowardliness.” Sriniketan today had a cluster of teaching, research and extension activities, which the Committee found to be working disjointedly and without a unified vision.

The Committee viewed these realities of Santiniketan- Sriniketan against the original impulses which brought Visva-Bharati into being, as also the changed conditions of modern India, the altered tools of pedagogy and research worldwide, and embarks on carrying out the Paridarśaka’s mandate in that light.