

VISVA-BHARATI 'SRINIKETAN': A SCHEME
FOR VILLAGE RECONSTRUCTION

Starting scientific agriculture in the surrounding villages and instituting a comprehensive plan of rural reconstruction were fundamental to Visva-Bharati's goals. An Institute of Rural Reconstruction was established in 1922 at a village called Surul, within two miles of Santiniketan. It was named Sriniketan, Abode of Well-Being. In 1921, Rabindranath invited Leonard Elmhirst from England to lead the Sriniketan Institute of Rural Reconstruction. He had met Elmhirst during his travels in America in 1920-21 when Elmhirst was graduating in agricultural studies at Cornell University. Rabindranath had two objectives in his village work: educate the villager in self-reliance, and bring back 'life in its completeness' to the villages with music and readings from the epics as in the past. Due to his meagre resources, he was willing to limit the experiment to 'one or two' villages if necessary. He hoped that success with even a single village might serve as an ideal for the whole country. Given the problems of over three hundred million people, he hoped at least to touch the hearts of his village neighbours at Santiniketan. He had begun this work in his family estates at the time of the Swadeshi Movement. Sriniketan was a continuation of the same principles. Dorothy Whitney Straight, daughter of an American millionaire who later married Leonard Elmhirst, put Sriniketan on its feet financially by endowing it with a permanent fund. Rabindranath dedicated his book *The Religion of Man* to Dorothy. There was a period in Visva-Bharati's history when idealists from all over the world joined hands with the Sriniketan villagers to bring hope and action to their lives.¹

¹Leonard Knight Elmhirst (1893-1974), agricultural economist, led Visva-Bharati's scheme of rural reconstruction from 1921 to 1923. He and his wife Dorothy Straight later founded the Dartington Trust in Devonshire, England, inspired by Rabindranath's ideas of education.



It is not enough to try to remove wants; you can never remove them completely from the outside; the far greater thing is to rouse the will of the people to remove their own wants.²

We have started in India, in connection with our Visva-Bharati, work of village reconstruction, the mission of which is to retard the process of race suicide. If I try to give you the details of our work, they will look small. But we are not afraid of smallness, for we have confidence in life. We know that if as a seed it represents the truth that is in us, it will overcome opposition and conquer space and time. According to us, the poverty problem is not the most important, the problem of unhappiness is the great problem. Wealth, which is the synonym for the production and collection of things, men can make use of ruthlessly. They can crush life out of the earth and flourish. But, happiness, which may not compete with wealth in its list of materials, is final, it is creative; therefore, it has its source of riches within itself.

Our object is to try to flood the choked bed of village life with the stream of happiness. For this, the scholars, the poets, the musicians, the artists, have to collaborate, to offer their contributions. Otherwise they must live like parasites, sucking life from the people and giving nothing back to them. Such exploitation gradually exhausts the soil of life, which needs constant replenishing, by the return to it of life, through the completion of the cycle of receiving and giving back.

Most of us, who try to deal with the poverty problem, think of nothing but a greater intensive effort of production, forgetting that this only means a greater exhaustion of materials as well as of humanity. This only means giving exaggerated opportunity for profit to a few, at the cost of the many. It is food which nourishes, not money; it is fullness of life which makes one happy, not fullness of purse. Multiplying materials intensifies the inequality between those who have and those who have not, and this

²Rabindranath Tagore, *The Growth of Visva-Bharati 1901-1921*, Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati Bulletin No. 8, April 1928, p. 6.

yields a fatal wound to the social system, through which the whole body is eventually bled to death.³



I used to sit in my house and watch the farmers come to plough their small fragmented and scattered fields—with their bullocks and ploughs. Each man ploughed his own land only. I thought how needlessly they were wasting their strength. I called them and said, 'Plough all the land together; pool your capital and resources, and you will be able to get a tractor and get your plowing done easily. If you all work together, the insignificant differences in the land can be neglected, and you can portion out whatever profit there is among you. You can store all your harvest in one place in the village, and the merchants can buy from there for the right price.' They listened and said, 'A very good idea, but who will carry it out?'

If I had had the necessary knowledge, I would have undertaken it, for they knew and trusted me. But we cannot help merely by our willingness to help. There is nothing so dangerous as inexperienced service. In our country nowadays the young students of the towns have taken up village service. The villagers laugh at them. How can they help them? They don't know their language and have no acquaintance with their minds.

From that time I made up my mind that I must do some village work. I sent my son and Santosh abroad to learn agriculture and animal husbandry and began to turn over all kinds of plans in my mind.⁴



What was it that hindered us from taking upon ourselves the full responsibility of our own education, sanitation, prevention of crimes, and such other duties that God himself, and not Montagu⁵ or British

³Rabindranath Tagore, 'City and Village', *Visva-Bharati Bulletin* No. 10, December 1928, pp. 24-25.

⁴Rabindranath Tagore, 'City and Village', *Towards Universal Man*, p. 321. Santosh Chandra Majumdar (1886-1926), student of the first batch at the Santiniketan school who also went to the University of Illinois to study agriculture.

⁵Edwin Montagu (1879-1924) Secretary of State for India 1917-22

Parliaments, had given us to perform entirely according to our own way? The sacred responsibility had been lying before our own door wearily waiting, not for any passing of a Bill, but for real sacrifice from ourselves.

The *power* is where there is right, and where there is the dedication of love. It is a *maya* to imagine that the gift of self-government is somewhere outside us. It is like a fruit that the tree must produce itself through its own normal function, by the help of its inner resources. It is not a Chinese lantern, flimsily gaudy, that can be bought from a foreign second-hand shop to be hung on the tree to illuminate its fruitlessness.

All this I tried to explain in 'Swadeshi Samaj'—and when I found that nobody took me at all seriously, and when pedants discovered to their utter disgust discrepancies between my proposal and some doctrine of John Stuart Mill, then I took up unaided my village organization work, which at the present moment is throbbing out its last heart throbs in a remote corner of Bengal. Certainly, I was more successful in writing the song on that occasion—'If nobody cares to come in answer to thy call, walk alone'.

Of course turning out songs is my proper work. But those who are unfortunate cannot afford to limit their choice to the works they *can* do; they must also bear the burdens of the tasks they *cannot* do!⁶



It is hard to imagine a life as cheerless as in our rural areas.

I could hardly see a way out. It is not easy to do something for people who have cultivated weakness for centuries and don't know what self-help is. But I had to anyhow make a start.⁷



I was one of the principal organizers of the National Fund and my conscience hurts to even think about it now. Our countrymen became excited with hope whenever some big plan was announced. Inevitably,

⁶Rabindranath Tagore, 'On Constructive Work—A Letter', *Modern Review*, Calcutta, March 1921, pp. 355-56. John Stuart Mill (1806-73), British political economist.

⁷Rabindranath Tagore, 'Abhibhasan', Address to the Visva-Bharati Sammilani, 1922, p. 11.

what followed were disillusionment and disgrace. I concluded early enough that these endeavours were utterly futile. I told myself the best thing is to start something on a very modest scale, single-handedly, and to build it up away from the public gaze. There was no other alternative, particularly for those of us who are compelled to work in a miserly fashion because our resources and our ability to bear initial losses are limited.⁸



I have never treated village people disrespectfully. But our *bhadralok* class often does that. It doesn't even know how to behave though it regards itself educated because of its university degrees. Yet our shastras say: *shraddyeya deyam*, 'when you give, give with respect'.⁹



When our college students study economics and ethnology, they rely entirely on European scholarship to learn about their own villages. The rural people mean nothing to us because we regard them as *chhotolok*, meaning, literally, small people. Given such contempt for their own village people, it is not surprising that educated Indians prefer to learn about their country's history and society from the Europeans. There have been many an ethnological 'movement' among our common people. Our educated class is ignorant about those. It takes no interest in its native environment because it does not have to study it to pass examinations.¹⁰



There was a time when our villages were in intimate contact with the manifold culture of this land. Towns were administrative centres serving

⁸Rabindranath to Rathindranath Tagore, 7 April 1910, Bengali Letters, File Tagore, Rathindranath. Translated by UDG. (RBA.)

⁹Rabindranath to Santosh Chandra Majumdar, Santiniketan, undated, probably September 1916, Bengali Letters, File: Majumdar, Santosh Chandra. Translated by UDG. (RBA.) *Bhadralok* refers to the white-collared upper and middle classes in Bengali society.

¹⁰Rabindranath Tagore, 'Palli-Seva', 1926, *Palli Prakriti*, pp. 64-65. Translated by UDG. *Chhotolok* refers to the lower or menial classes in Bengal.

special purposes mostly of an official and professional character while for the complete purposes of the people's life the villagers were cherished and served by all the capable persons of the land with the most of their means and the best that their minds produced.

Today, for various reasons, villages are fatally neglected. They are fast degenerating into serfdom, compelled to offer to the ungrateful towns cheerless and unintelligent labour for work carried on in an unhealthy and impoverished environment. The object of Sriniketan is to bring back life in its completeness into the villages, making them self-reliant and self-respectful, acquainted with the cultural tradition of their own country, and competent to make an efficient use of the modern resources for the improvement of their physical, intellectual and economic condition.¹¹



We must see that a force from within the people starts functioning. When I was writing *Swadeshi Samaj* the same idea had struck me. What I wanted to say then was that we did not have to think of the whole country; we could make a start with one or two villages. If we could free even one village from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established. That is what occurred to me then and that is what I still think. Let a few villages be rebuilt in this way, and I shall say they are my India. That is the way to discover the true India.¹²



I have an institution in Santiniketan that is mainly academic, but so many of the villages around it are in decay. Their culture is failing, their social life is deteriorating, their economic base is disintegrating. These villages are Hindu, Muslim and Santali. Except that we employ a number of these village folk for various menial tasks in my school, we have no intimate contact with them at all inside their own communities. Some years ago, I

¹¹Rabindranath Tagore, *Sriniketan: The Institute of Rural Reconstruction*, Visva-Bharati Bulletin No. 11, December 1928, p. 1.

¹²Rabindranath Tagore, 'City and Village', *Towards Universal Man*, p. 322.

bought from the Sinha family a farm just outside the village of Surul, a little over a mile from Santiniketan. I hear that you might be interested in going to live and work on such a farm in order to find out more clearly the causes of this decay.¹³



Speaking of the villages that I know of personally, I may say they are absolutely appalling in their total joylessness. Gone without trace are *jatra*, *kathakata*, *kirtan* and other aids to folk education and folk entertainment. Those who patronized these have either left the village or their sense of values has undergone complete reorientation. The village folk are no more able to benefit from what knowledge we have acquired or amassed; or rather, we are no more able to plough back our stored knowledge into the soil of their mind. Their mental life is no longer enlivened with music and ballads and tales. It is these plain and simple fares which constitute those organic elements with which to enrich their mind and heart. Without them life ceases to be worth living. The sad anomaly is that our cities hardly make for social contacts in the real sense. Here, lanes and bye-lanes separate us and walls rear up their heads forbiddingly. In the city, it is hardly ever possible to establish those simple and natural relations which should obtain amongst the members of a community. Such intercourse can take place only in the rural setting. But, then *bhadraloks* are finding it increasingly onerous to spend time in the villages. They complain that there they do not get food material in sufficient quantities, and, as far as food of the mind is concerned, the less said the better. They seem to overlook the fact that it is because they deserted their villages that the villages have now become a desert.

Nobody seems to go deep into the problems that the village faces today, and even if they do they are reluctant to formulate their findings in clear terms. The way to our survival does not lie only in our non-cooperation with the foreigner. In order to live we must coexist with our rural brethren. Few among us know or realize the sad state of affairs that are allowed to flourish in the village. Some of the communities there indulge in atrocious

¹³Rabindranath to Leonard Elmhirst, in conversation, New York, 1921, Leonard Elmhirst,

travesties in the name of their ancient faiths and religions—a tragic fact which does not even bear talking about.¹⁴



Your letter has delighted me. Every day I am getting more and more envious of your swaraj at Surul, especially when I hear of your hens contributing their dues to the commonwealth. Plato had no place for poets in his Republic—I hope your Swaraj of Chashas do not cultivate platonic ideals in their election of members. I am proud to be able to remind you of the fact that my poet's contribution reached you weeks earlier than that of the most conscientious and capable of your hens. I do not know what has happened to that poem of mine which I had to copy twice over—please take that to be my petition of candidature for poet-laureateship of your Swaraj if you have the good sense to acknowledge that the culture of imagination is not altogether superfluous for the purpose of agriculture. Please take it seriously when I say that my whole heart is with you in the great work you have started. I wish I were young enough to be able to join you and perform the meanest work that can be done in your place, thus getting rid of that flimsy web of respectability that shuts me off from the intimate touch of mother dust. It is something unclean like prudery itself to have to ask a sweeper to serve that deity who is in charge of the primal cradle of life. I wonder if you fully realize how great is your mission and what a future it has before it. But the small beginnings which you have made of this institution [in] a remote corner of the world carries in it a truth for which men today are groping in bewilderment. It is the truth of Peace. Real peace comes from a wealth which is living, which has the blessings of nature's direct touch, which is not machine-made—let us seek humbly, coming down to the soil, dealing with forces of life which are beautiful and bounteous.¹⁵



¹⁴Ibid., pp. 170–72. *Jatra* refers to a form of folk theatre or street drama, *kathakata* to a battle of wits, and *kirtan* to devotional songs. All three forms of entertainment belong to the folk tradition of Bengal.

¹⁵Rabindranath to Leonard Elmhirst, Shelidah, 31 March 1922, English Letters. File:

My days have been strenuous and though often I have felt that I am not strong enough to bear the strain, I do not repent. I am the sower of seeds, the soil is not barren and I am sure the harvest will be reaped in my time.

You know my heart is with Surul. I feel that it has life in it—it does not deal with abstractions, but has its roots deep in the heart of living reality. You may be absolutely certain that it will be able to weather all storms and spread its branches wide. I shall have a good talk with you about the questions you have raised in your letter when I return sometime in the first week of December.¹⁶



It has been my earnest desire for long that we in this country should deal with the problems of agriculture in a big way. I had sent some of our young men abroad to study agriculture so that on their return home they might tackle this problem and thus serve their motherland. During those days, I had said in my article entitled *Swadeshi Samaj* that we have to reconstruct our national life with the village as the centre. To bring completeness to the village has been a dream of mine of long standing. That must have been the reason why I shared this dream with Mr Elmhirst when I met him for the first time in the States. I had told him that if he could come to India there would be no dearth of work to do and that he might be of help in bringing to the Indian village the kind of fulfilment that I had envisaged. He readily agreed to my proposal.¹⁷



It is well known that the education which is prevalent in our country is extremely meagre in the spread of its area and barren in its quality. Unfortunately, this is all that is available for us and the artificial standard set up is proudly considered respectable. Outside the bhadrakalok class, pathetic in its struggle to affix university labels to the names of its members,

¹⁶Rabindranath to Leonard Elmhirst, Trivandrum, 13 November 1922. Ibid., Photocopy. (RBA.)

¹⁷Rabindranath Tagore, Introduction to Elmhirst's Lecture 'The Robbery of the Soil', delivered to the Visva-Bharati Sammilani at the Ram Mohan Library, Calcutta, 28 July 1922. *Poet and Plowman*, p. 166.

there is a vast obscure multitude who cannot even dream of such a costly ambition. With them we have our best opportunity if we know how to use it there, and there only can we be free to offer to our country the best kind of all-round culture not mutilated by the official dictators. I have generally noticed that when the charitably minded city-bred politicians talk of education for the village folk they mean a little leftover in the bottom of their cup after diluting it copiously. They are callously unmindful of the fact that the kind and amount of food that is needful for the mental nourishment must not be apportioned differently according to the social status of those that receive it . . . Our people need more than anything else a real scientific training that could instil in them the courage to experiment and initiative of mind which we lack as a nation. Sriniketan should be able to provide for its pupils an atmosphere of rational thinking and behaviour which alone can save them from stupid bigotry and moral cowardliness.¹⁸



Man's civilization has grown in its several departments by the conjunction of his own intellect with the gifts of Nature. These two must work in partnership throughout. Whenever man's intellect, feeling secure by locking up its acquisitions in some strong-room of habit, has fallen asleep, his wealth has left him. For, the store that is not added to goes on dwindling. We cannot afford to live on the accumulations of a bygone age for long, in fact, we have already come to the end of our resources.

Science has given man immense power. The golden age will return when it is used in the service of humanity. The call of that supreme age is already heard. Man must be able today to say to it, 'May this power of yours never grow less; may it be victorious in works and in righteousness!' Man's power is Divine power; to repudiate it is blasphemy.

This latest manifestation of man's power must be brought into the heart of the villages. It is because we have omitted to do so that our water-courses and pools have run dry; malaria and disease, want and sin and crime stalk the land; a cowardly resignation overwhelms us. Whichever way we turn,

¹⁸Rabindranath to Leonard Elmhirst, 19 December 1937, English Letters, File: Elmhirst, L.K. Photocopy. (RBA.)

there is the picture of defeat, of the penury due to the depression of defeat. Everywhere our countrymen are crying, 'We have failed.' From our dried-up hollows, our fruitless fields, our never-ceasing funeral pyres, rises the wail, 'We have failed; we have failed; we own defeat!' If we can but gain the science that gives power to this age, we may yet win, we may yet live.¹⁹



I am sure you will be able to help our Visva-Bharati by the experience you gain in your European tour. We specially want you to study for us Agricultural Cooperation in Ireland and let us know how far its methods can be adapted to our condition. We shall be very thankful if you can persuade some experienced man who has worked with AE to come and help us in our village work for about six months or more if it is possible. Of course, on our side we shall be only too glad to offer to you the pecuniary help you need so much, the amount of which will be fixed in our committee meeting according to our financial capacity and communicated to you without delay.²⁰

¹⁹Rabindranath Tagore, 'City and Village', Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati Bulletin No. 10, December 1928, pp. 9-10.

²⁰Rabindranath to James H. Cousins, undated, (1924?), English Letters, File: Cousins, J.H. (RBA.) James Henry Cousins (1873-1956) was a poet and educator who came to India from Ireland in 1915. AE was the pseudonym of Irish author and active member of the Irish Nationalist Movement, George Russell (1867-1935), who worked for Irish agricultural improvement through the Cooperative Movement.

Rabindranath wanted to draw scholars from other countries to Visva-Bharati. In 1923, the Lecture Association of Peking invited him to China. They had earlier invited Bertrand Russell and John Dewey on the same lecture programme. Rabindranath welcomed the prospect of this visit because it would give him an opportunity to associate Visva-Bharati with China and also renew cultural ties between the two countries. Although the invitation was made to him personally, he arranged for Kshitimohan Sen of Visva-Bharati's Indology Department and Nandalal Bose of the Art School or Kala Bhavana to come with him. Leonard Elmhirst also accompanied them. Together they set out from Calcutta by SS *Ethiopia* on 24 March 1924. Jugal Kishore Birla donated twenty thousand rupees to Visva-Bharati to pay for this tour. Rabindranath gave lectures in the cities of Shanghai and Peking as well as in five of the country's twenty-four provincial capitals—Hangchow, Nanking, Tsinan, Taiyuan and Wuchang. His lectures were well received in general but China's youth challenged his views about the greatness of the ancient Chinese civilization. They distributed a leaflet against him in the Chinese language after his second lecture in Peking in which they wrote, 'Since he has come to indoctrinate us we must express the displeasure his lectures create in us.'¹ He stayed in China just under seven weeks and gave more than two dozen talks. He sailed for Japan on 30 May. In Japan, he reiterated his opposition to militant nationalism. He returned to India after four weeks in Japan.²

¹Stephen Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China, and India*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970, pp. 162-63, 389. (Hereafter, *Asian Ideas*.)

²Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), philosopher and political campaigner; John Dewey (1859-1952), philosopher and pragmatist; Nandalal Bose (1882-1966), painter and art teacher who headed Santiniketan's Kala Bhavana; Jugal Kishore Birla (1883-1967), Congress activist and elder brother of the business tycoon Ghyanshyam Das Birla.