Architecture and Education in India

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ARCHITECTURE & EDUCATION IN INDIA: 
Rabindranath Tagore's Philosophies of Education in Harmony with Nature

Taylor Mills-Nyenhus Grant Recipient

INTRODUCTION

This summer I received a Nyenhuis Grant which funded a three-week research trip to India. I visited Calcutta, Santiniketan, and Pune to learn about the literary giant Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). His legacy today is founded upon over 50 volumes of poetry, numerous plays, musical dramas, dances, novels, short stories, travel journals, and autobiographies. However, his legacy extends beyond the written word and into the concrete as he founded his own school in Santiniketan. My research focused on Tagore’s philosophies of education with specific regard to nature and architecture. I visited his school, examined the local archives, and read relevant sources about his life, writings, philosophies, and impact. For my final project, I created an interactive digital map that traces the spread of Tagore’s influence while discussing his history, theories, philosophies, and contributions to modern architecture and education.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

- Born and educated in Jorasanko estate where artists and authors would visit often
- Philosophies influenced by father’s religion, based upon the Upanishads
  - Believed in the world consisted of the One, the Infinite, and man, the finite, who bears the essence of the Infinite
- Purpose of life was transition from finite individual to the universal
- Connecting with the Infinite through Nature was essential for growth and learning

TAGORE’S SCHOOL: SANTINIKETAN

- “Santiniketan was the realisation [sic.] of an idea—a Poet’s ideas on the education of children, on the importance of feeling the smell of the rain, the peacefulness of life amidst nature’s bounty while learning and growing up. It was an attempt to make philosophy a part of every day life.” (Das, 65).
- Architectural design of Santiniketan reflected Tagore’s philosophies of the Infinite and the importance of Nature. Examples include:
  - Extensive outdoor seating
  - Morning classes held outdoors
  - Open terraces and verandas in every building
  - Lotus designs, artistic use of water, and more windows than walls

FLAME UNIVERSITY

- VSC designed FLAME University, a modern liberal arts college in Pune. The architectural parallels to Santiniketan are remarkable:
  - Extensive outdoor seating
  - Blurred lines between what is “indoors” and “outdoors”
  - Integration of plans, sunlight, and open windows
  - Outdoor lecture spaces

CONCLUSIONS

In some ways Tagore’s emphasis on nature as a holistic approach to education is visible on modern campuses like FLAME and even the Pine Grove of Hope College. Given that Santiniketan and FLAME are both successful schools, I think striving toward integrating more of Tagore’s philosophies of education would only enhance the mission of a liberal arts education to fully develop students.