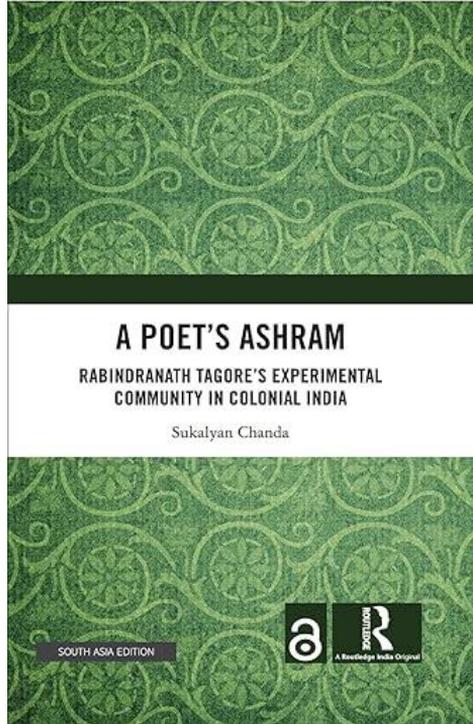


Sukalyan Chanda, *A Poet's Ashram: Rabindranath Tagore's Experimental Community in Colonial India*. London & New York: Routledge, 2025. 173pp. ISBN: 978-1-032-37153-5



There is never an end to Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)! His relevance does not cease to exist. Every other day we come across new studies and anthologies on Rabindranath Tagore, whose ideas of cosmopolitanism, syncretism, and globalisation have become increasingly important now, especially in a world of rising conflict, alarming friction, environmental consciousness and widening fissures. The present book under review is a significant contribution to Tagoreana but it deals with a very basic, yet essential aspect of Tagore's views and practice on education whereby he built up his 'Ashram,' his experimental community in colonial India. Ever since he set up the experimental school 'Brahmacharyashram' in Santiniketan on December 22, 1901, he mentioned that it would be based on the ancient practice of acquiring education at the residence of a *guru*.

At the very beginning, the author Sukalyan Chanda opines that it is curious that Rabindranath's "role as the founder of an ashram community has

yet to receive scholarly attention,” especially because he “cannot be easily classed as one of the spiritual *gurus* whose domain is the ashram” (p.1). The three basic questions that he raises here and attempts to find the answers are: a) Why did Rabindranath Tagore wish to revive the institution of the ashram? b) Did he reinvent that age-old ideal? and c) How did his conception of his ashram evolve? Through his ashram, Rabindranath conceptualised not only a system of education but also a way of living and a community. This community was meant to be firmly grounded in India’s cultural inheritance. The effort to imagine and build this experimental ashram community was a collective one in which many extraordinary individuals participated. In the Introduction, Chanda mentions clearly that “we need to distinguish between the spiritual retreat envisioned by Debendranath and the ashram community that later emerged through Rabindranath’s efforts to translate his educational ideas and ideals into praxis” (3). In several of his writings, the poet saw his ashram as his own creation and talks about his effort to found it. Here we can refer to his well-known view propounded in his essay “My School” (1917) which states that his educational ‘work’ has “found its soul in the spirit of the *ashram*” where it is located and that the school is only its outer form. Thus, the distinction made by him between the ashram and the school, the ideological ‘soul’ of his institution and its outward pedagogic function, is significant.

Rabindranath’s nostalgic effort to revive the pedagogy of the *tapovana* was based upon a critique of the derivative urban modernity epitomised by the colonial city. Through his idea of the *tapovana*, he was trying to imagine an alternative space, a space where human beings could cultivate a sense of kinship with nature. One of the main arguments of this book is that the poet’s ashram found its spiritual basis in an idea of universal unity that was based on his personal reading of Upanishadic spirituality. At his ashram, he attempted to translate that spiritual idea into a community life that foregrounded principles such as unity, inclusivity, and collaboration. But it was not intended to be a mere replica of the ashrams of ancient India. It embodied an attempt to challenge the hegemony of the colonising nation and to bolster the cultural self-respect of the colonised. Interestingly, Rabindranath was familiar with some of the communitarian experiments that began in various parts of the world in the early twentieth century. These included, among others, the schools founded by the German pedagogue Paul Geheeb and his wife Edith Geheeb, the School of Wisdom established by the philosopher Hermann Keyserling at Darmstadt, Germany in 1920, and the Dartington Hall Trust founded by Leonard Knight Elmhirst and his wife Dorothy in 1926.

Chanda further explains that Rabindranath's conception of his ashram is not something that is self-evidently present in any individual writing. He articulated that concept through a wide range of writings and over a period of four decades. These writings are mainly essays, speeches, and letters written during the period 1901-1941. Memoirs authored by teachers, former pupils, and visitors have also been accessed to acquire a broad perspective on the relationship between the ideas and the praxis. Apart from drawing upon a large body of Bengali writings, the author has accessed the archival resources including both published and unpublished materials that are not easily accessible. The first chapter of the book focuses on the milieu within which Rabindranath's ashram came into being. While he rejected blind revivalism, he nevertheless called for a selective appropriation of India's Hindu past. What he wished to rejuvenate was a set of ethical and spiritual values inherited from that past. He also sought to differentiate his ashram from the conventional educational institutions that, he believed, functioned mechanically. The second chapter attempts to locate the spiritual and ethical bases of Rabindranath's ashram and pays particular attention to a concept that gained prominence within that context – the concept of a dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, between a spiritual East and a materialistic West. His grounding and personal reading of the Upanishadic idea of universal oneness that underlined the importance of principles like unity and inclusivity shaped his ideas of the ashram ambience further.

The next two chapters are based on the perception that this idea played a vital role vis-à-vis the ways in which the poet sought to envision his ashram as a community that practiced inclusivity through its daily existence. Chapter 3 pays particular attention to the spatial politics underlying his concept of the *tapovana* as a utopian alternative to urban existence. Through his ashram – a modern *tapovana* – Rabindranath envisioned a return not to the real forest but to a set of values grounded in India's ancient past. Chapter 4 focuses on how the poet envisioned his ashram as a human collectivity. By embracing a spiritual ideal of oneness, Rabindranath's ashram transcended the ideological imperatives of narrow sectarianism. The history of Visva-Bharati, his international university, illustrates the emergence of a new type of ashram community where spirituality becomes an ethical way of living that acknowledges the importance of being inclusive.

The fifth and final chapter focuses on the democratic and egalitarian principles his ashram upheld. It outlines how Rabindranath tried to decolonise minds through a distinctive way of living that emphasised the importance of self-reliance, democracy, and creativity. Within the ashram community, this effort involved a radical transformation of the asymmetrical power relations that existed

between teachers and pupils, between the rural peasantry and the urban educated elite, and between men and women. It talks about Rabindranath's conception of *swaraj* as self-reliance and examines how, in the early 1920s, Sriniketan, his Institute of Rural Reconstruction, undertook the task of training village communities to be self-reliant. The poet hoped that at his ashram peasants and the *bhadralok* (the elite) would join hands to build up an alternative social order. At his ashram, women were encouraged to transcend the boundaries of 'home' and to extend their presence into the larger social spaces of the community.

This book can by no means be dismissed as just another volume in the catalogue of Tagore studies. In 1921, the university was formally inaugurated. The idea of the ashram was gradually rendered redundant by a process of transforming Visva-Bharati into a normative university. In 2023, Santiniketan's new status as a World Heritage Site, apart from stressing the importance of its historical buildings, gardens, and works of art, also underlies the enduring value of its educational and cultural traditions. It reiterates Rabindranath's conception of his ashram as an anti-colonial space and how his idea of an inclusive, socially conscientious, and environmentally conscious community remains relevant in today's world. By probing into the concept of his ashram, Sukalyan Chanda has been successful in giving us a fresh perspective on the intellectual history of Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, and Sriniketan, proving once again how Rabindranath himself saw his university as the 'vessel' carrying his life's 'best treasure' and how he conceptualised not only a system of education but also a way of living and a community. Any experimental community must be based on a set of shared ideals and it becomes dysfunctional when its members cease to believe in those ideals. During the final years of his life, Rabindranath frequently expressed his anxieties regarding the future of Santiniketan and Sriniketan. Sometimes he tried to cling to the hope that the ideal worked imperceptibly. His anxieties regarding the possible disintegration of the ethical community he wished to build comes out clearly in one of his final addresses to the inmates of his ashram when he said, "There is no need to deny that, for whatever reason, you are no longer ready to accept the inner ideal that lies beneath all the activities and duties of this ashram" (Essay no. 19, in *Visva-Bharati*, p.290. Translated from Bengali by the author, p.156).

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