Ecotourism In and Around Santiniketan: Challenges and Potentialities

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Abstract

Santiniketan, Tagore’s ‘Abode of Peace’ is located in the western part of the state of West Bengal in India. The place is the site of Visva Bharati, a world renowned residential university as well as a *Brahmacharya Asram* (hermitage where a vow has been taken by the residents) established by Rabindranath Tagore himself. Santiniketan, in the Birbhum District of West Bengal and its environs provide ample scope for the development of ecotourism. It is a place where ecotourism and rural tourism go hand in hand. The place has an idyllic setting. Around Santiniketan, there exist a number of tribal villages inhabited by the Santhal tribe. Ecotourism combines nature tourism, wilderness tourism and agri-tourism. This form of niche tourism is essentially rural in character. It is a type of Special Interest Tourism that has emerged recently and has evoked concern among social scientists. Of late, ecotourism has become popular in the tribal villages around Santiniketan. A unique natural landscape here is formed by the *khoai*, a vast, desolate area with lateritic soil and gulley erosion. Resorts have been built in the *khoai* by private entrepreneurs where tourists flock round the year. Ballavpurdanga, along with some other typical Santhal villages – Boner Pukur Danga, Mouldanga and Phuldanga, bordering the Sonajhuri forest in the khoai, have been brought within the Rural Tourism Scheme under the Endogenous Tourism Project (ETP) introduced by the Government of India in the early years of the 21st century. Tagore was a wayfarer. Although in his times, the concept of ecotourism had not emerged, the Poet was one with nature and one can say that he would have definitely advocated the practice. This paper studies the scope and sustainability of ecotourism in Santiniketan and seeks to find out the benefits it can provide to the host community and to visitors. The paper also attempts to investigate how ecotourism, as a practice, can serve actively in a rural reconstruction programme as envisaged by Tagore.
Keywords: Ecotourism, Santiniketan, Tagore, khoai, tribal villages.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore was a wayfaring poet, as exemplified in the title of the exhibition of photographs detailing Tagore’s travels, organised by Tagore Centre, London and the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs) in the Scottish Parliament in 2012. During his lifetime, he visited more than thirty-four countries, and paid repeat visits to some of them. ‘I am a wayfarer of the endless road,’ he wrote. Tagore had an enormous interest in the cultural lives of the people residing in different parts of the world. The Poet was a genuine advocate of international understanding and conceived of a global village. He nurtured a bonding with nature through his travels. Tagore was essentially an advocate of ecological sustainability and development. He opined that nature and human life existed as integral parts of a single entity. In this sense, he was a deep ecologist. According to Tagore, eco-ethical human living should be a symbiosis between Man and Nature and between man and man. His views regarding eco-ethical living were deeply influenced by ancient Indian philosophy, mostly based on the Upanishads. Tagore viewed that in the modern age, this symbiosis between Man and Nature has been adversely affected by increasing consumerism, competition and commercialism, which would lead to disastrous consequences. Tagore inculcated within himself a refined sense of beauty and truth and an appreciation for the finer elements in one’s life. His philosophy was essentially based on humanism, which he believed should be considered the greatest aim of mankind. All his life he upheld the role of Nature in man’s well-being. Through his innumerable songs and poems, he expressed his love and dedication towards Nature. He established his school in Santiniketan out of his emotional response to Nature. Throughout his life, Tagore spoke of peace and global harmony. His ideas about internationalism also inspired his desire to travel and interact with cultures all over the world. Tagore aspired towards a society in which economic prosperity would go hand-in-hand with the growth of humanism. Such a society would be one in which men and women, at all levels, would be able to fulfill their basic minimum needs. He wanted to keep the path to development open in all respects. Tagore’s goal of social development was entirely divorced from political issues.

The main objective of this paper is to find out the potentialities and problems of ecotourism development here. In the process, it has been examined how closely ecotourism in this area is tied up with heritage tourism in Tagore’s university – Visva Bharati and how far ecotourism can help in rural reconstruction as conceived by Tagore. The research-work is both descriptive and analytical. The paper has been divided into two sections. The first

1 Amrit Sen, ‘The Wayfaring Poet’, *India Perspectives*, 24.2 (2010), p. 52.
2 Christine Marsh, *The Once and Future Village: From Tagore’s Rural Reconstruction to Transition Towns*. Retrieved from https://tagoreanworldpress.com [Accessed on 29 September, 2017]
3 R. L. Basu, ‘VIEW POINT: The Eco-Ethical Views of Tagore and Amartya Sen’, *Culture Mandala (Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies)*, 8.2 (2009), p. 56.
section defines and analyses ecotourism and the second looks at Tagore’s ideas in Practice in Santiniketan and Sriniketan before moving to considering ecotourism projects to conserve the locale and a whole way of life. Tourism involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas. The principle of sustainable development has been a subject of concern in tourism research since the early 1990s. An emerging concept in the field of sustainable tourism is ecotourism. Ecotourism is closely tied up with conservation of the environment at the tourist spot. Since the quality of the destination-environment plays an important role in meeting customer expectations and generating customer satisfaction, the state of the natural and cultural environment of the tourist destination should essentially be preserved.

Ecotourism: An Overview

Ecotourism implies ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education.’ The Ecotourism Society defines it as purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the culture and the natural history of the environment; taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem; producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of the natural resources beneficial to the local people. Thus, ecotourism is primarily inspired by the natural resources beneficial to the local people by the natural history and the natural landscape of a region. It focuses on biological and physical features. The concept of ecotourism developed in the 1970s and 1980s, as the environmental movement experienced a boom. Since the 1980s, ecotourism has been growing at a rate of 34 percent per year and has developed as the fastest growing tourism segment. It was in the 1990s that ecotourism became a buzzword and the stakeholders – the conservation community, the people living around protected areas and the travel industry realised their mutual interests in directing the growth of this form of tourism. Many of the underdeveloping nations identified ecotourism as an effective tool that served conservation and development goals simultaneously. Today, ecotourism is looked upon as a panacea to bring about conservation of nature, preservation of biodiversity, protection of fragile ecosystems, creation of environmental awareness, community development, showcasing indigenous cultures and fostering socio-cultural growth. Ecotourism has a scientific, aesthetic and philosophical approach. It helps to sustain landscapes and habitats. It incorporates ecologically sensitive architecture and land use designs; it counts heavily on infrastructure developed in harmony with the surrounding nature. It stresses on the conservation of energy, minimising the use of fossil-fuels and the protection and preservation of flora and fauna. A large percentage of the revenue earned

4 D. R. Khullar, _India: A Comprehensive Geography_ (Ludhiana: Kalyani Publishers, 2011), p. 854.
5 _Ecotourism: Principles, Importance, Guidelines and Mitigation_. Retrieved from http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com [Accessed on 12 October, 2017]
6 The International Ecotourism Society.
7 TIES Global Eco Tourism Fact Sheet (Washington D.C.: The International Ecotourism Society, 2005) Retrieved from https://www.courserhero.com. [Accessed on 30 September, 2017]
from ecotourism is retained within the host country as the use of locally owned facilities and services is emphasised in this form of tourism. The concept of ecotourism has two dimensions: contribution to conservation and enjoyment of nature. In addition, it encourages motivation for travel, related to activities that contribute to the social, economic and physical environments, and at the same time, further environmental awareness and knowledge. Therefore, the most essential characteristic of ecotourism is sustainability.

As a subset of sustainable tourism, ecotourism seeks to promote economic and social development without compromising the state of natural ecosystems and biodiversity. Ecotourism is directed to minimise physical, social, behavioural and psychological impacts and to foster respect for nature. Since it is pre-conditioned by environmental consciousness of tourists, it entails a corresponding environmentally responsible conduct. The following chart indicates its beneficence.

Ecotourism

- Protection of natural areas
  - Generation of Revenue
  - Environmental education
  - Local involvement
  - Conservation (Biodiversity and natural resources)
  - Development (Economic infrastructural growth)
  - Stewardship
  - Local control

Sustainability

Ecotourism is an alternative to conventional tourism. It may be looked upon as a form of Special Interest Tourism (SIT) and has been more popular in the Developing World countries such as Costa Rica, Nepal and Ecuador. Ecotourism involves travelling to exotic and remote places by nature-lovers. The major purposes of ecotourism are appreciation of nature and gaining authentic and first-hand knowledge about indigenous cultures. It has been found that ecotourists are generally affluent, well-educated, mature and environmentally focused. Most of these tourists belong to the high-income group and have tertiary education. They travel in small groups, with the desire to accomplish an in-depth study of nature. Ecotourism is a
form of niche tourism that aims at increasing the economic viability of marginalised areas, particularly in terms of infrastructure and income and improving living conditions in rural areas. The other objectives of ecotourism are to provide funds for ecological conservation by directing revenues for the purpose, to empower local communities and encourage local participation in decision-making. It also fosters respect for different cultures and human rights, positive experiences for both the host community and the visitors, memorable interpretative experiences to tourists, financial benefits for local people and private industries. Besides, it includes an educational component for both the host community and the tourist, as the host community can interact with the tourists, learn about their experiences and can adapt to their culture and the tourists get to know more about the area and its local culture. Thus, ecotourism embraces ‘nature tourism’, ‘wilderness tourism’, ‘low impact tourism’ and ‘sustainable tourism’. Ecotourism is essentially tied up with community-based tourism. This is because the community forms an integral part of the tourism activity. Also, the community is well aware of and has a historical understanding of how the region adapts to changes in response to tourism development and it is the community which is highly affected by tourism in an area. By participating in the tourism sector, the socio-cultural integrity of the community is promoted. Efforts towards the development of ecotourism in developing countries are often directed towards pro-poor tourism (PPT). In this way, ecotourism has the potentiality of integrating the conservation of natural resources along with the protection of the socio-economic interests of the local people. Thus, ecotourism denotes positive tourism-environment linkages. However, the tourism-environment relationship is extremely complex. While ecotourism is often able to maximise the productivity and utilisation of all kinds of resources such as forests, mountains and coastal areas, it may produce significant impacts on consumption patterns, the physical environment and social systems, especially in fragile areas. With increase in tourist activity, different types of visitors create contrasting demands and impacts upon the resources of the area. This causes the relationship between the host community and the tourists to develop from one of co-existence to one of conflict. Therefore, an intensely scientific approach must be taken in the development of ecotourism to make it sustainable in the long-run. As the environment is an integral part of the industry, it must be ensured that the environment is diligently conserved. Ecotourism should make optimal use of environmental resources, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve the natural and cultural environment. Each ecosystem has a threshold capacity for development and use, beyond which there would occur progressive deterioration in the environment, leading to its ultimate destruction. This ultimate enduring power of a tourist destination to withstand use is known as its carrying capacity. When the level of visitor use supersedes the environment’s ability to cope with this use within limits of acceptable change (LAC), negative impacts result. Therefore, it is essential that the use of an ecotourist destination compliments its carrying capacity.

8 The tourist becomes knowledgeable about the destination, while the host community comes to learn about the culture of the tourist community.
9 Nature tourism - Tourism that involves enjoyment of nature; Wilderness tourism – Tourism that involves travelling to remote areas; low impact tourism - Tourism that produces minimum impact on the environment; Sustainable tourism-Tourism that uses resources in a rational manner so that the resources are not completely depleted but can be used by future generations (My explanation).
Methodology

The economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts of ecotourism around Santiniketan have been determined through primary survey conducted in the field by the researcher. Interviews were held with the help of sets of questionnaires and the target population in this case comprised of the tourists as well as the host community. One of the challenges faced by the researcher throughout the study period was the procurement of authentic figurative data, as no record of tourist arrivals in this region is available from either the Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal or the NGOs. Therefore, the analysis of data in the case of this research has been primarily qualitative. Photography and observation in the field form an integral part of the study. For obtaining secondary information, books and periodicals, news dailies, websites, pilot survey reports, dissertations, District Census Handbooks and the District Gazetteer were consulted.

Figure 2: Location of the study area within Bolpur-Sriniketan Block. Source: Author
Located in the Birbhum District of West Bengal, within the Bolpur-Sriniketan Block, is Santiniketan – Tagore’s ‘Abode of Peace.’ The town and the villages around it are set atop a hard, lateritic crust, forming the water-divide between the Ajoy and Kopai rivers. In the early twentieth century, the Brahmacharya Ashrama10 here was conceptualised by Tagore on the ideals of Tapovan,11 a fact that still arouses the enthusiasm of thousands of tourists – domestic and international. The places around the Ashrama provide an idyllic atmosphere with large, open space and scenic beauty. The entire Ashrama is dotted with sculptures and murals – mostly the creative works of leading Indian artists like Ramkinkar Baij, Nandalal Bose, Binode Behari Mukherjee and K. G. Subrahniyam. Heritage buildings such as Udayan, Dehali, Santiniketan Griha, Talodhwaj, Cheena Bhavana and Dinantika exist all around. Classes are held under trees in the Amrakunja, Salbithi and Bakulbithi.12 Education amidst nature was the motto of Rabindranath Tagore and these classes bear testimony to this belief. The Visva Bharati campus is surrounded by a cluster of villages, mostly inhabited by adivasis.13 Agriculture had been the primary means of livelihood here until the famine of the 1760s. As a consequence of the devastating famine, very few households were left for tilling the land and the paddy fields were converted into a jungle. At this point of time, when the area was being plundered, the wave of industrialisation set in. More than a century later, with the establishment of Visva Bharati by Tagore, village industries were set up in the area and a programme of rural development was undertaken. In 1922, Sriniketan was established as the second contiguous campus of Visva Bharati. Sriniketan was set up by Tagore with the aim of rural reconstruction, in order to improve the quality of life in the surrounding villages. Cooperatives were formed to assist the villagers in their economic endeavour. One such cooperative was set up as a handicrafts unit in Ballavpur. In course of time, it became a society for rural development and came to be known as ‘Amar Kutir.’14 Tagore’s concept of rural reconstruction stemmed from the love towards his country. He knew that a large percentage of the country’s population resides in the villages and therefore, the prosperity of this group of people would ultimately lead to the country’s development as a whole. The villagers should be educated and empowered adequately15 and they should be equipped with the minimum power to bring about a balanced social, economic, environmental and political growth of their surroundings. This would make them aware of the socio-economic and political situation around them and help them to adapt to it. Tagore based his idea of rural reconstruction on three, interconnected principles – self-empowerment, co-operative functioning and development. Empowerment is enabled through self-reliance. It is self-

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10 Brahmacharya Ashrama denotes hermitage where a vow has been taken by the residents (My explanation).
11 A residential unit within the forest where students take lessons from teachers and render them certain services (My explanation).
12 Groves of Mango (*Mangifera indica*), Shaal (*Shorea robusta*) and Indian medlar (*Minospa elegy*) trees.
13 Tribal people, mostly Santhals here (My explanation).
14 ‘Amar Kutir’ is a co-operative set up near Sriniketan to revive rural handicrafts (My explanation).
15 Jayanta Ghoshal, ‘Rural Reconstruction and Education – Tagore’s Views’, *Mainstream* LII. 20 (2014), p.
reliance that helps a person to express the potentiality within him.

**Ecotourism in and around Santiniketan**

Under the ‘Endogenous Tourism Project’ (ETP) that was introduced in India in the early years of the twenty-first century, destination development pilot projects were undertaken at a number of rural sites within India. These villages were brought under the Rural Tourism Scheme and were supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). One such village in West Bengal is Ballavpur in the outskirts of Santiniketan. It is located in the Bolpur-Sriniketan Block of Birbhum District, under the Gram Panchayat Ruppur. The Ballavpur Rural Tourism site is a cluster of villages where ecotourism goes hand in hand with rural tourism. A unique natural landscape here is the khoai, a vast, desolate area with lateritic soil. It is marked by gully erosion, forming an extensive badland. Hence, the khoai serves as an interesting site for both ecotourists and geotourists. Here, resorts have been set up using indigenous raw materials to accommodate tourists, both domestic and international. The metropolitan city of Kolkata is only 160 km away and people from this city flock to Santiniketan with a desire for leisure tourism during week-ends and vacations.

**Tourism products for ecotourists around Santiniketan**

Tourism resources may be defined as all of those features, which draw people into a destination and form the essence of the location’s tourism appeal. Tourism infrastructure and services such as catering, tourist guides, travel agencies, etc. also form part of the tourism resource. A wide variety of tourism products has made Santiniketan and the region around it a hotspot of ecotourism as well as cultural and heritage tourism. The area around the Visva Bharati campus is essentially rural in character. The rural hinterland of Santiniketan is a unique selling point (USP) for the destination. As mentioned earlier, the villages here are inhabited mostly by adivasis, namely Santhals. The Santhals form one of the largest tribes of India and have zealously preserved in their age-old rituals and customs. As a result, their ethnic Santhali culture has not yet been overrun by the deforming forces of globalisation. The Santhals still engage in colourful group dances and folk songs, with the accompaniment of traditional musical instruments. The Santhal villages around Ballavpur form a major attraction for tourists visiting Santiniketan and add to the virgin charm of the area.

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16 Mayura Balasubrahmaniam, *The Geotourism Challenge: Celebrating Places – Changing Lives*. Retrieved from www.changemakers.com [Accessed on 9 October, 2017].
17 *Redefining Tourism: Experiences and Insights from Rural Tourism Projects in India*. Retrieved from http://www.equitabletourism.org [Accessed on 12 October, 2017].
18 An administrative unit under which there are one or more villages.
A large part of the khoai is adorned with sonajhuri plantations and eucalyptus trees. The sonajhuri forest in this area provides an ideal picnic spot. It is set in sylvan surroundings, with the Mayurakshi Canal beside it and not far away flows the Kopai River. The sonajhuri forest has seven rock nature sculptures of birds. A weekly market by the name of ‘Khoai boner annya haat’ is held here every Saturday. The market is known for local handicrafts, made by the village artisans. Many of these are unique and display the impeccable taste of the craftsmen. The rural handicrafts include jewellery made of indigenous materials obtained from the forests, *kantha-stitched* and embroidered clothes, *dokra* and terracotta artifacts, hand-crafted tableware, different types of lanterns, glass paintings, ceramic pottery, bags and a host of decorative goods. *Bauls* and Santhali dancers throng the haat and entertain the tourists with their songs and dances.

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19 Plantations of earleaf acacia (*Acacia auriculiformis*).
20 A different type of village market in khoai.
21 *Kantha* is a special type of quilt-stitch embroidery. It is indigenous to West Bengal and Bangladesh. This kind of embroidery is practised mainly by rural women.
22 *Dokra* is a kind of metal work – a rural handicraft practised in the villages of West Bengal, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and some other states of India.
23 *Bauls* denote a religious cult of Bengal, singing folk songs in praise of gods and goddesses and the universe.
Figure 4: The Sonajhuri Forest, full of sonajhuri and Eucalyptus trees.

Figure 5: The Saturday market in the khoai.

Nearby is Prakriti Bhavana, a nature art museum displaying natural sculptures in driftwood, dry wood and metal. The museum’s garden is also dotted with rock sculptures. Prakriti Bhavana bears testimony to the legacy of Tagore’s concept of linking man with nature through art.
Opposite this area is found the Ballavpur Wildlife Sanctuary, also known as Deer Park. At one time, it was famous for the *Krishnashar* or blackbuck, now only a few spotted deer exist in the sanctuary. Within the sanctuary is found a wide variety of trees such as sal, akashmoni, minjiri, mahua\(^{24}\). This is also a haven for migratory birds, particularly in winter, when bird watching becomes an additional attraction.

In Shyambati,\(^{25}\) there is a Nature Interpretation Centre by the name of Prakriti Bikshan Kendra. It encloses a nature museum with fossils, carbonised wood and pictures related to activities in the forest. There are three cottage accommodations for tourists within the campus.

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\(^{24}\) *Shaal* (*Shorea robusta*), Earpod wattle (*Acacia auriculoformis*), Yellow cassia (*Senna siamia*), Madhuca longifolia.

\(^{25}\) An area adjacent to the Visva Bharati campus.
A large number of eco-parks\textsuperscript{26} have been established around Santiniketan to entertain the tourists. One such destination of ecotourism is the Ballavpur Eco-Park, Ballavpur Eco-Park with picturesque natural surroundings located near Sriniketan. Within the eco-park, a number of cottages and a resort – ‘Natun Pata’ have been built.

\textsuperscript{26} Eco-park is a park meant for recreation for the public as well as for protection of the ecosystem.
Another eco-park near Santiniketan is Shayor Bithi, located between the Santhal villages of Phuldanga and Prantik in the Taltor mouza. Shayor Bithi has a children’s park with swings, statues and rocking cradles. Besides these, there are boating facilities in the lake adjoining it and a restaurant within the park. While Shayor Bithi is located in the north of Bolpur-Sriniketan Block, in the southern part there is Deul. This park also has a tank with boating facilities. The main advantage enjoyed by this destination is its proximity to the Ajay River. Another destination for eco-tourists is Amkhoi Fossil Park. The angiosperm wood fossils displayed in this park were collected during pond digging from Amkhoi village of Illambazar Forest. These specimens indicate that this area was covered by thick deciduous forests 15 to 20 million years ago. These forests were found in the highlands of the Rajmahal Hills and Chotanagpur Plateau to the northwest of Birbhum. It is presumed that the trees from these forests were carried by occasional floods of the river system flowing from northwest towards southeast in Birbhum, Bardhaman, Bankura and Medinipur Districts and were deposited under fine sand and clay to be transformed into wood fossils. The Fossil Park is an ideal destination for educational tourism and invites study tours. It also helps greatly in preserving the valuable fossil woods as a natural heritage of the Bengal Region.

27 Angiosperms are flowering plants.
Sabujbon is another eco-park, located in Rasulpur Village adjacent to Bardhamaan District. A large number of endemic species\(^{28}\) have been planted in the 150 acres of land in this eco-park, so that it serves as a botanical garden for tourists. Nearby flows the Ajay River. The concept of the plant museum in this eco-park is unique and probably the first of its kind in Asia. Within the greenery, clearings have been made, where cottages with thatched roofs and mud walls have been set up to accommodate guests. Organic vegetables\(^{29}\) grown within the complex are served as food. A large number of butterflies, birds and flowers are also found in Sabujbon, so that it provides an excellent site for nature photography.

\(^{28}\) A species indigenous to one particular area, a species that cannot be found in any other area.

\(^{29}\) Organic vegetables are vegetables that are grown by organic farming, i.e., without the application of chemical fertilisers and by applying techniques such as crop rotation, biological pest control, etc.
Figure 9: Endemic species of plants in Sabujbon.
A unique attraction here is the Kopai River. The Kopai has been made immortal in Tagore’s famous poem, ‘Amader chhoto nadi.’\textsuperscript{30} The road to the Kopai is flanked by lush green paddy fields, with occasional palm trees. As revealed from primary survey, baul singers nowadays sit by the riverside to entertain passers-by. New tourist resorts are coming up in this area.

\textsuperscript{30} A poem in \textit{Sahaj Path}, one of the children’s books written by Tagore. (See Appendix)
Based on ecotourism, a large number of attractive resorts have come up in the study area. Babli Guest House offers cottages with a wide range of tariffs. Babli is a rural-action project ten km from Bolpur, in the Dwaronda Village. Banalakshmi is another resort in Dwaronda, spread over thirteen acres. It has extensive farmland attached to it and fruit orchards with dense growth of mango, guava and coconut trees. A large variety of farm-based products including honey, squash, pickles, jam and handicrafts are sold from Banalakshmi. Another resort here is Udasin, which has received a certificate from the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, as ‘Incredible India, B&B Establishment’. About twelve km away from Bolpur is Moram, a site where a village development programme has been undertaken through art and craft. Rangabitan Paryatak Nivas is a resort near Amar Kutir. Originally, around 2010, Rangabitan was planned by the Birbhum Zilla Parishad under MGNREGA\textsuperscript{31} to develop a mango orchard. Subsequently, the Bolpur-Sriniketan Panchayat Samiti developed cottages here as guest houses. The Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal has taken up the task of developing Rangabitan as a resort for ecotourism. At present, there are about twenty cottages here.

\textsuperscript{31} Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.
Major findings from the study

From primary survey in the field, it was found that most of the tourists visiting Santiniketan are domestic tourists, although international tourism has developed to some extent. It was also found by the researcher that a large percentage of these tourists come from Kolkata and the remaining come from the surrounding districts. Most of them are motivated to visit Santiniketan by the attraction of Visva Bharati, which they consider a tourist spot in itself. Therefore, Santiniketan is looked upon by tourists more as a heritage destination, connected with the life of one of the world’s greatest poets – Rabindranath Tagore. Santiniketan, as such, has a wide variety of tourism products to offer. These are heritage buildings, murals and sculptures, aesthetics in the sphere of fine arts and performing arts, unique handicrafts, attractive folk culture, colourful festivals, scenic beauty and rural culture. Therefore, in and around Santiniketan, different types of tourism have developed including cultural tourism, nature tourism, educational tourism, festival tourism and rural tourism.

From a primary survey, it was found that tourists visiting Santiniketan are not ‘hard’ eco-tourists, i.e., they do not possess a high level of nature interest and environmental commitment. It has been observed by the researcher that tourists visiting the Sonajhuri forest, the kboai and the surrounding villages often travel by motor vehicles that emit carbon dioxide, thereby causing air pollution. Moreover, they stay in air-conditioned rooms and are not concerned about energy consumption. However, the lodge owners in
Santiniketan informed the researcher that there is very little atmospheric pollution in the area as the totos\textsuperscript{32} carrying tourists are battery-driven. Most of the eco-lodges\textsuperscript{33} in and around Santiniketan are casual eco-lodges or agri-eco-lodges. They serve ‘soft’ eco-tourists, i.e., tourists who tend to concentrate in well serviced, accessible areas and have a general, less informed interest in nature. In fact, a large percentage of the lodges can hardly be considered eco-lodges as they are equipped with air-conditioners and television sets and thus, do not meet the criterion of energy conservation. However, it has been seen that these lodges frequently serve organic food (including fruits and vegetables) from their own gardens, which they supplement with ingredients from outside. Also, these lodges have a limited number of rooms which restricts overcrowding and mass tourism.\textsuperscript{34} It has been observed by the researcher that the design of the lodges set up in the\textit{khoai}, such as\textit{Baul Hut},\textit{Sakuntala Village Resort},\textit{Ram Shyam Village Resort}, are seamlessly integrated with the natural surroundings and do not cause visual pollution. These structures have a vernacular architecture\textsuperscript{35} and are made of locally available materials so that the entire concept ideally matches with the rural ambience.

\textsuperscript{32} A kind of three-wheeled vehicle found in the rural areas of India.
\textsuperscript{33} Lodges made of eco-friendly materials and meant for ecotourism.
\textsuperscript{34} A kind of conventional tourism in which huge crowds are involved, causing inconvenience for the host community.
\textsuperscript{35} An architectural style that reflects local traditions and is designed, based on local needs, with local construction materials.
Figure 13: A resort in the khoai made of indigenous materials to match the rural ambience.

The tourists who come to Santiniketan for enjoying nature tourism and rural tourism generally belong to the high-income group. That is why most of the resorts, although overpriced, show high occupancy rates. In general, the tourists who visit Santiniketan and the khoai, the Saturday market and the surrounding adivasi villages stay for a maximum of two to three days. Many of them have been found to be repeat visitors. Tourists visiting the khoai are highly interested in the Saturday market. Huge crowds gather at the ‘Khoai boner annya haat’ as the Saturday market is called, because it provides ample scope for shopping rural handicrafts and for enjoying baul songs and adivasi dances. Tourism in Santiniketan is a seasonal activity. The tourist season starts from October, reaches its peak in December-January and lasts till March. As most of the tourists are from Kolkata and October is the month of the Puja holidays in West Bengal, tourists flock to the resorts at this time of the year. The month of December coincides with the Pous Mela (the winter fair) in Santiniketan. Therefore, festival tourism attains its height at this time. Again, December-January is the time for the winter vacation. March is the month when the Vasantotsava is held in Santiniketan. This festival draws tourists from all over India. After March, the number of tourists falls as summer sets in. Some resort managers have reported that visitors arrive in the weekends even in summer as the resorts provide air-conditioned rooms. From all this, it can be concluded that Santiniketan serve as a perfect weekend destination, even in the summer months. The boom in ecotourism in and around Santiniketan has been found to benefit the local people. Although exact data on tourist arrivals over the years is not available, the local people affirmed that there has been an upswing in tourist inflow since 2012, particularly from 2014 onwards. This period coincides with the expansion of the Saturday market and the establishment of various resorts around the Sonajhuri forest. Hence, it can be concluded that the increase in tourist inflow in and around Santiniketan is strongly tied up with the development of ecotourism and rural tourism in this area. Ecotourism has resulted in a direct increase in the income of the toto drivers as the number of passengers moving about in totos

36 Spring Festival.
has gone up. In the resorts, more and more local people are being employed in cleaning the rooms, cooking traditional dishes and serving the guests. One of the resorts, it was found, employs only *adivasi* women to serve food, while the cooking is done by men. Some of the resorts are renovated every year before the tourist season and *adivasis* from the surrounding villages are employed in this renovation work. In fact, it is the adivasi women who help the masons in construction and renovation. Also, it has been found that the local *bauls*, Santhali dancers and other performers earn a considerable amount by entertaining the audience at the tourist resorts and at the Saturday market. Their performances are highly appreciated by the tourists, which gives them an incentive to preserve their indigenous culture. Encouraged by the prospects of having an income, the Santhali men and women have formed small groups of their own in order to present folk dances wherever they get an opportunity. The local artisans have reported that their income has also increased with a spurt in ecotourism and rural tourism. From the accounts of these people, it can be concluded that ecotourism in Santiniketan tends to be pro-poor.

Figure 14: Santhali dancers performing at the Saturday market.
However, the researcher has found that there is a lack of community participation in tourism in and around Santiniketan. The local people have almost no role in taking decisions regarding tourist activities although they are the ones most affected by tourism development in the area. Rather, it is the private entrepreneurs who profit most from ecotourism here. Again, it has been found from primary survey that in recent years there has been an enormous growth in the number of tourists visiting Santiniketan, which leads to all the detrimental effects of mass tourism. The host community considers the tourists invasive, exploiting the infrastructure of the place, particularly during festivals. Most of the domestic tourists are ignorant about the heritage value, the history of the place and the importance of the natural landscape as they look upon Santiniketan as any other tourist spot. Further, accommodating the ever increasing number of visitors and fulfilling their expectations becomes a Herculean task for the host community. It must be kept in mind that Visva Bharati is an academic institution. It is not therefore meant to manage tourists and cater to their demands at the cost of its academic activities. It has been noticed by the researcher that the host community today expresses open irritation against the arrival of tourists in Santiniketan, as they become the worst sufferers, particularly during festivals when there is a huge rush on the trains and traffic jams on the roads leading to Bolpur. In fact, the normal life of the host community is frequently disrupted by the arrival of tourists. An example of this may be cited in the fact that toto drivers increase their rates every Saturday as there is an excessive demand for totos by tourists travelling to the Saturday market. Considering Doxey’s Irritation
Index, it may be said that the stage of antagonism has been reached by the host community in Santiniketan.

![Butler’s Destination Area Life-cycle](image)

Figure 16: Butler’s Destination Area Life-cycle.

Due to the excessive pressure created by mass tourism on the natural and economic resources of this region, adverse effects accrue to the host community. On the whole, tourism growth in Santiniketan has almost reached the stage of stagnation, considering Butler’s Destination Area Life-cycle, but ecotourism still remains in a nascent stage.

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37 Doxey’s Irritition Index model suggests that host communities pass through a sequence of reactions as the impacts of tourism in their area become more pronounced and their perceptions change with time.

38 Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle explains the evolution of a tourism destination. According to Butler, a destination goes through the stages of exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline and finally, rejuvenation.
| Strengths                                                                 | Weaknesses                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Convenient location and accessibility.                                | 1. Lack of tourism infrastructure such as parking space, landscaping in the villages, etc.      |
| 2. Location within the tourism circuit of Birbhum.                       | 2. Lack of trained and skilled manpower.                                                        |
| 3. Scenic beauty and tranquility.                                        | 3. No community participation in decision-making.                                                |
| 4. Excellent communication system.                                       | 4. Lack of commitment to eco-tourism on the part of the stakeholders.                            |
| 5. Perfect rural ambience in the outskirts of Santiniketan.              | 5. Lack of home stays in the true sense of the term.                                             |
| 6. A large number of tourist resorts.                                    | 6. Seasonal nature of tourism.                                                                  |
| 7. Pollution-free environment.                                           | 7. Lack of statistical data regarding arrival of tourists.                                      |
| 7. Nearness to the capital city of Kolkata.                              | 8. Lack of attractive signages.                                                                 |
| 8. Nearness to the Brahmacharya Asrama-Tagore’s ‘Abode of Peace.’        | 9. Poor marketing of tourist products. Marketing only by word of mouth.                         |
| 9. Large number of eco-parks, gardens, jheels (tanks) and rivers.        | 10. Lack of websites, advertising the tourism products.                                         |
| 10. Tribal villages in the vicinity.                                    |                                                                                                |
| 11. Availability of typical Bengali cuisine in the village resorts.       |                                                                                                |
| 12. A wide variety of rural handicrafts.                                 |                                                                                                |
| 13. Saturday market as a major attraction.                               |                                                                                                |
| 14. Folk culture with baul singers and Santhali dancers.                 |                                                                                                |
| 15. Colourful festivals, particularly the Vasantotsava and the Pous Mela. |                                                                                                |
| 16. Traditional art and culture as an additional attraction.             |                                                                                                |

Ecotourism in Santiniketan: A SWOT Analysis
| Opportunities                                                                 | Threats                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Excellent scope for nature tourism.                                      | 1. Chances of mass tourism, putting excessive pressure on natural resources. |
| 2. Can develop into a weekend getaway as it is only one hundred sixty km from Kolkata. | 2. Stagnation in the tourism life-cycle.                                  |
| 3. Scope for shopping heritage handicrafts.                                 | 3. Under utilisation of potential tourism resources.                     |
| 4. Scope for heritage tourism.                                               | 4. Antagonistic attitude on the part of the host community.              |
| 5. Scope for sightseeing.                                                    |                                                                         |
| 6. Temples and Sati-pithas nearby. Hence, scope for pilgrimage tourism.     |                                                                         |
| 7. Scope for successful development of rural tourism, including agri-tourism. |                                                                         |
| 8. Scope for nature photography.                                             |                                                                         |
| 9. Scope for direct interaction with the village artisans and exchange of cultures. |                                                                         |
| 10. Nature walks and bicycle tours around the tribal villages and along the Kopai River. |                                                                         |
| 11. Stimulation of other economic sectors through backward and forward linkages and cross-sectoral synergies with sectors like agriculture, horticulture, poultry, handicrafts and transport. |                                                                         |

Ecotourism in Santiniketan: A SWOT Analysis
Proposals and suggestions for sustainability of ecotourism in Santiniketan

In the past few years, tourism development in Santiniketan has been rather haphazard. What is being promoted in the name of ecotourism is simply conventional tourism with a few, superficial changes, so that it has culminated in mass tourism. In fact, the consequences of mass tourism are offsetting the benefits derived from ecotourism. It should be kept in mind that ecotourism and mass tourism are extreme poles. Therefore, adequate planning is necessary to control mass tourism in Santiniketan and the area around it. Collaborative planning should replace traditional planning processes as collaborative planning leads to fair and equitable decisions relating to current participants. Such planning should focus on a balance between the costs and benefits of tourism in the best interests of the community. Strong policy measures are required to convert the place into a holiday or leisure destination. Private Public Partnership (PPP) is especially important in sustaining ecotourism and community-based tourism in developing countries like India, where awareness about eco ethical living is limited. Synergy between the private and public sectors and other stakeholders of tourism is an absolute necessity in the case of tourism development in Santiniketan. A plan should be chalked out to obtain public sector funding, which will, in the long run, encourage private sector investment in the tourism industry and promote ecotourism. In order to sustain ecotourism in the true sense of the term, identification of tourism activities that are compatible with the study area is absolutely necessary. By exploring alternative travel choice, the impact of tourism transport can be addressed. Nature walks and bicycle tours around the tribal villages are ideal in the context of the study area. Short distance bullock-cart tours, especially around the Kopai River, can make ecotourism more participatory and meaningful. Because of the seasonal character of the tourism industry in Santiniketan, the destination tends to have many times more inhabitants in the high season than in the low season. This problem should be dealt with by the Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal as well as by private entrepreneurs. Non-fixed roof accommodations like tree-houses and tents and camping facility should be made available for ecotourists. Home stay arrangements are needed to enable substantial increase in the income of the locals and to make visitors more aware of the local culture and natural heritage of the place. Improvement of medical facilities is required urgently in the study area. Tourism marketing must be done effectively. For this purpose, colourful brochures, innovative websites, creative advertising and attractive signages are essential. Capacity building trainings should be imparted to the villagers in areas of tourism management and

39 Sati is the consort of Lord Shiva. According to Hindu mythology, after the death of Sati, the parts of her body disintegrated and fell in some places all over the Indian sub-continent. Sati pithas with temples came up in all those places. There are, in total, 52 Sati pithas – 51 in India and 1 in Pakistan.
40 Collaborative planning is planning that delegates responsibility for preparing plans directly to affected stakeholders.
41 A cooperative arrangement between two or more public and private sectors.
42 Home stay is a kind of accommodation in which tourists stay with the host’s family and are served food cooked by the host.
tourism products like gastronomy\textsuperscript{43} and handicrafts. Training on catering and housekeeping services, tour guiding skills and allied activities must be provided through workshops in order to build a skilled and trained workforce in the area. West Bengal Tourism along with the local panchayats should take a leading role in constructing well-built village roads and hygienic wayside amenities. The Tourism Department should take up the maintenance and archival of data on tourism. Periodic researches should be undertaken to assess emerging tourist trends and identify sustainable alternatives. Finally, it should be emphasised that commodification\textsuperscript{44} will render ecotourism unsustainable. Therefore, it is necessary to preserve the tranquillity, rural way of life and rural arts and crafts in the area so that they do not become victims of commercialisation.

**Conclusion**

Rabindranath Tagore was an ardent believer in rural regeneration through economic and social development of the masses. He advocated infusing self-confidence and self-esteem among them by means of self-reliance. Tagore’s dream of rural reconstruction through the well-being of the adivasis is today partially being fulfilled through ecotourism in Santiniketan. As mentioned earlier, the adivasis around Santiniketan are indirectly getting involved in activities related to ecotourism such as preparing Bengali cuisine, serving food, cleaning jobs and construction of resorts and in the process, are getting themselves empowered. The Amar Kutir Society for Rural Development is directly involved in the programme of rural reconstruction envisaged by Tagore. In the post-Independence period, Amar Kutir became a co-operative to rejuvenate and develop rural handicrafts, in accordance with the ideals of self–help and sustainable rural development advocated by Tagore. Villagers from Manoharpur, Dangapara, Ballavpur, Binuria, Rajabhuro and Sattore supply handicrafts including needle-works, batik and handloom to the showroom. These are sold to the tourists visiting Amar Kutir. The Amar Kutir campus encloses a leather craft unit where primarily local women are involved. This unit has been expanded recently. Under a Central government scheme, a craft development centre was opened in 1992. Tourists visiting Ballavpur flock to Amar Kutir for shopping, allured by the unique handicrafts of Santiniketan. Their purchases contribute to the income of the Amar Kutir Society, which, in turn, contributes to rural development. Thus, tourism in Amar Kutir provides the Society with income for rural reconstruction through revitalisation of rural handicrafts. Not only so, owing to the growth of ecotourism in the area, local handicrafts have come to be appreciated, thereby instilling a sense of pride and self-esteem among the village artisans, providing further impetus for the growth of household industries in Ballavpur.

\textsuperscript{43} Display boards used to direct tourists to a destination.

\textsuperscript{44} The cooking styles of particular regions.
In conclusion, it may be said that tourism in Santiniketan originated with heritage tourism centred on Tagore’s Visva Bharati. It was this heritage tourism that paved the way for the growth of ecotourism in and around Santiniketan in later years. The growth of ecotourism and heritage tourism in and around Santiniketan will immensely help in rural reconstruction in the area in the near future.

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Appendix

Our little river

Our little river flows in graceful loops
The summer heat dries her to a gentle flow,
Both cart and cattle travel across with ease
Her banks are high, her depths are shallow

The sand bed glitters, no trace of mud
The far bank shimmers with Kash flowers white,
where flocks of mynas chirp busily all day
And jackal calls arise at night

This bank shelters sleepy hamlets in the shade
Of ranks of ancient mango and palm tree
At bath times, children swim and play
Splashing water at each other in noisy glee

Each day as their bathing is done
They catch little fish in nets of cloth
Women take home their pots scrubbed clean
Their washing all done, they return to their chores

When the rains descend, the river swells fast
Rushing waters raise voice in happy uproar,
The muddy torrent spins in eddies and swirls
Both banks uniting in joyous clamour
Awake, to join in the festival of rain