

The Historical Journey of Santiniketan (1863-2023): A Regional Approach

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Abstract:

Through a regional perspective, this paper examines Santiniketan's historical development, highlighting its distinctive contribution to the development of Birbhum and other Bengal's cultural and educational landscape. Originally established as a spiritual retreat by Debendranath Tagore in 1863, Rabindranath Tagore eventually turned Santiniketan into a trailblazing hub for internationalism, education, and the arts. Using a regional approach, this study shows how Bengal's cultural, social, and environmental background shaped and continued to influence Santiniketan's values through almost 160 years. It also describes how this neighbourhood project attained national and worldwide renown, ultimately leading to its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2023. The study emphasises Santiniketan's ongoing significance as a representation of progressive education, cultural synthesis, and sustainable living through archival research and contextual analysis.

Keywords: Santiniketan's historical development, Educational landscape, Regional approach, World Heritage Site, Sustainable living.

1. Introduction:

Santiniketan holds a unique place in the cultural and educational history of India, primarily because of its association with Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate poet, philosopher, and educationist. Three significant movements came together when Santiniketan was founded: the Bengali literary revival, the wave of social and religious reforms, and the nationalist fight against the British. It is important to talk about Santiniketan's prehistoric state prior to its official acknowledgement. The adage 'the present is the key to the past' suggests that the current geoenvironmental conditions of the location have significantly elevated prehistoric occurrences, which aids in the study of the current time-changing situation. It is best to break it up into three parts to begin with. The district of Birbhum comes first, followed by the city of Bolpur and the town of Santiniketan (Soman, 2014).

2. Selection and Importance of the Study:

Data pertaining to historical events are systematically gathered and assessed as part of the historical method of study. Sociology, political science, geography, history, education, and anthropology are among the fields that frequently employ it. It is crucial for comprehending the past, forming wise opinions about the present, and directing future activities.

Santiniketan, meaning 'abode of peace,' is a small town near Bolpur in the Birbhum district of West Bengal, India. Studying Santiniketan's history is important for comprehending the cultural, intellectual,

and educational underpinnings of contemporary India. It enables us to recognise Rabindranath Tagore's visionary heritage and the timeless principles of harmony, creativity, and peace that Santiniketan now stands for. In addition to preserving an important aspect of our history, this study encourages present and future generations to create a society that is more considerate and compassionate.

3. Research Objectives:

The objectives of the present research are the followings:

- To identify the pre-historical background of Santiniketan.
- To describe the historical journey of Santiniketan.
- To investigate Santiniketan's historical layers and their importance.
- To clarify the significant elements of Santiniketan's historical journey.

4. Database and Methodology:

The study's chosen methodologies determine the validity and dependability of any kind of research. Therefore, methodology is crucial in highlighting the main research findings. The primary focus of this study is descriptive, and it was generated using secondary data gathered from a variety of sources, including books, journals, articles, and magazines, among others. Standard historical research techniques have been applied in this study. The data was gathered from secondary sources, and a thorough analysis of the pertinent literature was conducted. After that, the analysis was completed with our goal in mind, and reasonable conclusions were drawn.

5. Pre-Historical Background of Santiniketan (Up to 1863 A.D.):

5.1 Nature of Rarh region in the Archives:

In the fifth century B.C., the final (24th) great Tirthankara Mahavira travelled through this region and described the geographical setting as the 'pathless country of Ladha in Vajjabhumi and Subbhabhumi (probably Suhma)', according to the ancient Jain text Acharanga Sutra. Some historians contend that the Aryanization of the region included the spread of Buddhism and Jainism in the Rarh region. Dr. Atul Sur has deduced that Gautam Buddha most likely travelled through this region on his way to Pundravardhana and Samatata, based on the Buddhist literature Divyabdan (O'Malley, 1910). The Gupta, Shasanka, Harshavardhana, Pala, and Sena rulers all had empires that included the Rarh area, which had previously been a part of the Mauryan Empire (Mitra, 2005). Following the breakup of Harshavardhana's empire, the Palas dominated the province until the 12th century AD, at which point the Senas took control of it. Buddhism, especially the Vajrayana religion, flourished here throughout the Pala era. The Chinese traveller Xuanzang wrote about some of the monasteries he visited in the 7th century A.D. (Hunter, 1876).

5.2 Characteristics of Birbhum District in the Historical Pages:

In the past, Birbhum was also referred to as the 'Switzerland of Bengal' by foreign tourists due to its scenic beauty, mild climate, and plenty of natural resources (Soman, 2014). According to locals, Birbhum means 'the land of the Vir'. Nonetheless, the term 'Vir' can be interpreted in several ways. It is claimed to represent the title of the Hindu rulers who previously governed the area, the 'manlier' race of people who lived here, the profusion of green jungle, or the wealth of the soil (Majumdar, 1975). Additionally, the district has played a vital role in Bengal's socioeconomic history, according to the archives (Hunter, 1876). Based on literature surveys (Shree Chaitanya Bhagbat, Mangal Kabya etc.), Birbhum district in and before the 19th century was covered with good vegetal coverage. Brindabon Das described the environmental

beauty of Birbhum district in the last volume of the book ‘Shree Chaitanya Bhagabat’ and mentioned the nature of Birbhum: ‘*Swavab-sundar prokriti Birboom*’.

The triangle’s apex points north, while the southern base is formed by the River Ajay. The districts of Birbhum and Bardhaman are separated by the river. Geographically speaking, this region is located at the northeastern tip of the Chhota Nagpur Plateau, where it descends downward and joins the Ganges’ alluvial plains. Historically, the district's western section has been referred to as Vajjabhumi or Bajrabhumi. Generally arid, it is an undulating upland. According to O’Malley (1910), the district as it currently exists seems to have been a part of the country’s ‘Rarh’ tract and ‘Vajjabhumi’ tract.

Mythology has explained that the forests of Vajjabhumi (west Birbhum) were hot-spots of Hindu and tantric activities. Even, highland of Santiniketan was an eminent place for tantra sadhana rituals and Shakti worship (Kar, 1949).

5.3 Empowerment of Landlords in Birbhum:

(a) *Medieval Age:*

Muslim control over the area began in the thirteenth century. However, the local Hindu chiefs, known as the Bir Rajas, appear to have had nominal authority over the western portions of the district. Relics can be found in the three towns of Rajnagar, Birsinghpur, and Hetampur. The majority of Birbhum was ruled by the kingdoms of Hetampur and Rajnagar (O’Malley, 1910; Roy, 2004; Mitra, 2005).

(b) *Modern Era:*

Birbhum was the name of the administrative division that was established in 1787 by the British East India Company. Administratively, it was a part of the district of Murshidabad before that. The district was substantially larger than it is today in 1787, when the former ‘District Beerbhoom’ was created. The district was once more run from Murshidabad, with an Assistant Collector still in charge at Suri, when the collectorship of Birbhum was dissolved in 1809. Birbhum was returned to its original location and reorganised as a distinct district in 1820. Only after the Santhal uprising of 1855-1856 and the split of the Santhal Parganas from Birbhum did the term Birbhum become officially recognised as an administrative unit (Sinha, 1967; Majumdar, 1975).

6. Historical Journey or Proto-History of Santiniketan (Onward 1863 A.D.):

6.1 Profounder and Year of Establishment:

When and how Santiniketan was founded are uncertain. It is commonly known that Rabindranath Tagore founded Santiniketan in 1901. The fact that Maharshi founded Santiniketan in 1863 is acknowledged by the highly educated individuals who care about it. However, scholars are aware that the name ‘Santiniketan’ existed long before 1863 and before Maharshi. During 1825–1863, the Sinha family in Raipur gave Santiniketan its name. However, the contemporary world is aware that Maharshi founded Santiniketan in 1863 (Acharya, 1982).

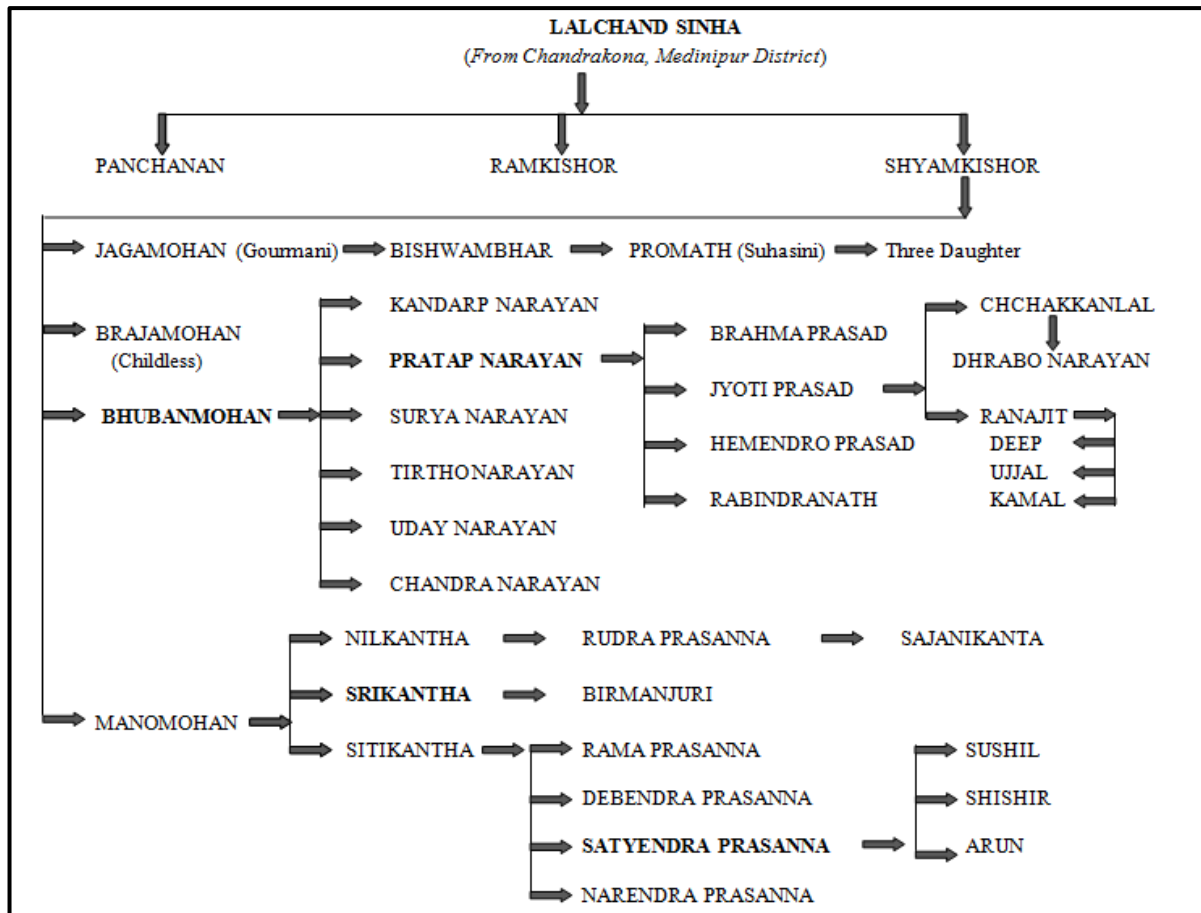


Figure-1: Genealogy of Sinha's (Lord) family of Raipur

(Source: Collected by Mr. Siddheshwar Mukhopadhyay from treasurer of Raipur Lord Family, Bhujanga Bhusan Sinha)

6.2 Arrival of Maharshi in Santiniketan:

In 1862, Maharshi came to Raipur at the invitation of the Sinha family. During this period, the Sinhas were acknowledged as elite landowners with a high level of education. As a result, this family was intimately linked to the Tagore's family of Jorashako. Pratap Narayan Sinha and Srikontha Sinha, a devout Brahmin disciple of Maharshi, were crucial during this time. Maharshi Debendranath Tagore was drawn to this location while touring the Santiniketan environs (Mukhopadhyay, 1962).

6.3 Reasons for Preference:

Maharshi was attracted by Santiniketan for the following causes (Acharya, 2010)-

- During those times, the central place of Santiniketan was dry and desert-like, infertile with undulating barren land and full of red gritty soil with only two *Chhatim* trees.
- *Maharshi* was a Brahmo worshipper. According to the Brahmo rituals, a wide spread, undulating, crowd-less upland area is suitable for the worship of Brahma.
- *Maharshi's* entire life was experienced with various pathetic, heart-rending events. So, to gain comfort and mental peace, he selected Santiniketan. He described Santiniketan as- '*Praner Aram, Moner Ananda, Atmar Shanti*' (She is - the repose of my life, the joy of my heart, the peace of my soul).

6.4 Receiving of Land for the Establishment of Santiniketan:

Maharshi after selecting Santiniketan on 3rd march 1863, he had rented 20 *Bighas* of this land including

‘*Santiniketan Griha*’ towards the North of Bhuban-Danga or Bhuban Sagar Bandh on lease (*Mourosi Patta*) from Pratap Naryan Sinha (son of Bhuban Mohan Sinha of Sinha’s family) for an annual rent of 5 Rupees which was to be used for meditation (see vide fig. 3.1) (Acharya, 1983).

Therefore, in history, Santiniketan means 20 *Bighas* land with 2 *Chhatim* trees and *Santiniketan Griha*. This is the nucleus of present-day Santiniketan.

6.5 Identity of Santiniketan as an *Ashrama*:

‘*Ashrama*’ is the term used with affectionate respect for the area that comprises certain open spaces with trees and buildings associated with the organizations of Santiniketan. This includes seven acres of denuded red earth which *Maharshi Debendranath* purchased to establish his *ashrama* (see vide plate-1).

‘It must be an Ashrama where men have gathered for the highest end of life, in the peace of nature; where life is not merely meditative, but fully awake in its activities, where boys’ minds are not being perpetually drilled into believing that the ideal of the self-idolatry of the nation is the truest ideal for them to accept; where they are bidden to realize man’s world as God’s Kingdom to whose citizenship they have to aspire; where the sunrise and sunset and the silent glory of stars are not daily ignored; where nature’s festivities of flowers and fruit have their joyous recognition from man; and where the young and the old, the teacher and the student, sit at the same table to partake of their daily food and the food of their eternal life’-----

- Rabindranath Tagore, 1917.



Plate-1

Plate-2

Plate-1: Entrance gate of Santiniketan ashrama; Plate-2: Upasana Griha

(Source: Photographs taken by researcher)

To understand the broad chronology and importance of the *Ashrama*, the *Ashrama*’s chief features must be mentioned:

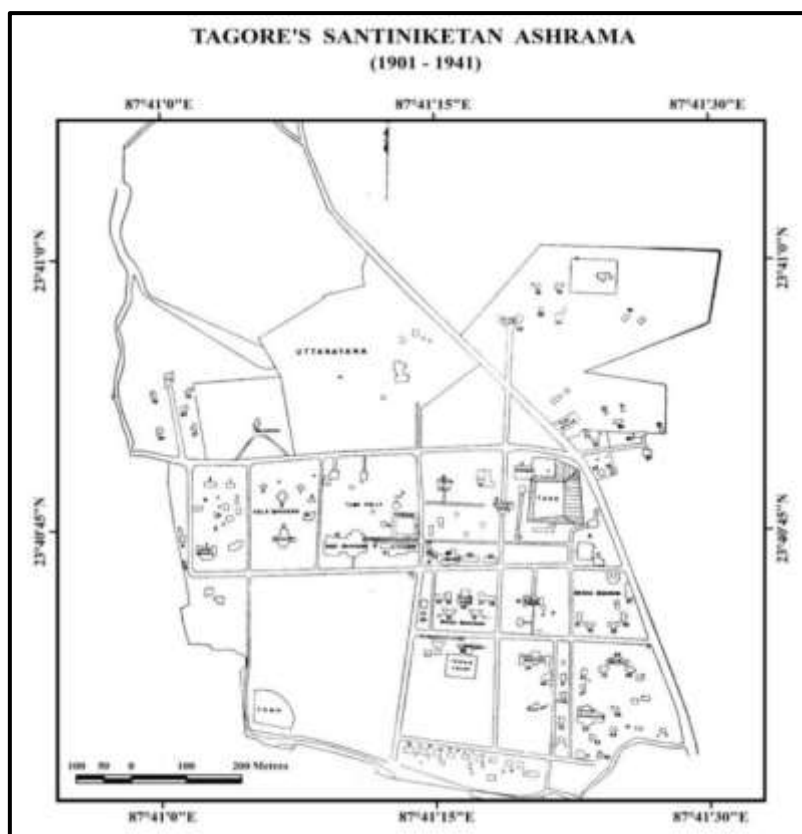


Figure-2: Sketch map of Tagore's Santiniketan Ashrama
(Source: Visva-Bharati Estate department, 2013)

1. The *Chhatimtala*, the spot amidst *Chhatim* trees where *Maharshi* Debendranath meditated, and the other trees such as teak, banyan, that stand guard around it;
2. The exquisite *Mandir* or *Upasana-Griha* made in 1891 of plain and coloured glass on a wrought iron supports for inter-denominational prayer (see vide plate-2).
3. The Santiniketan *Griha*, where Tagore lived as a child – now vacant but owning some beautiful ageing frescoes that needs the urgent attention of an archaeological chemist.

The boundaries of this *Ashrama* area include the Nepal Road on the South, the road going by the east side of the playground right up to the *Uttarayana* gate is the boundary on the west, the main metalled road going past the *Chhatimtala*, the *Mandir* up to the Bolpur-Goalpara Road forming the northern boundary and the Bolpur-Goalpara Road forming the eastern boundary (HLC Report, 2006).

6.6 Recognition of Santiniketan as World Heritage Site:

Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore founded Santiniketan in 1901 with the goal of serving as a hub for education and cross-cultural interaction, taking inspiration from both international artistic influences and ancient Indian customs. The location represents a vision of harmony and tranquility through a distinctive synthesis of design, landscape, and educational philosophy. Two UNESCO World Heritage criteria led to Santiniketan's inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2023:

- **Criterion (iv):** As an experimental settlement in education and communal life, Santiniketan represents a 'total work of art' where life, learning, work, and art intertwine seamlessly.
- **Criterion (vi):** Directly and tangibly associated with the ideas, works, and vision of Rabindranath Tagore and his associates, pioneers of the Bengal School of Art and early Indian Modernism.

As a result, Santiniketan's impact is felt outside of India, motivating South Asian educational and cultural establishments. Its avant-garde approach to art and education has influenced the region's 20th-century literature, poetry, music, and architecture (UNESCO, 2023).

7. Historical Layers of Santiniketan and Its Significance:

7.1. Maharshi's Period (Maharshi Debendranath Tagore) (1863-1901):

Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, father of Rabindranath Tagore, purchased land from the Sinha landowners (see vide fig.1) and built Santiniketan *Ashrama* in the late 19th century. In 1888, he executed a Trust Deed for the management of the *Ashrama* and dedicated it for the purpose of meditation. The structures belonging to this earliest phase of development include the *Ashrama*, Santiniketan *Griha*, *Upasana Mandir* (Prayer Hall), *Chhatimtala* (the site of the *chhatim* trees under which *Maharshi* meditated) (Pyarelal, 1958). This structural area forms the core of Santiniketan, which has recently been restored by the Archaeological Survey of India.

7.2. Gurudev's Period (Rabindranath Tagore) (1901-1941):

In 1901, Rabindranath Tagore established a *Vidyalyaya* (School) in Santiniketan *Ashrama* with a multifaceted vision to unite humanity in different cultures around the world (see vide fig.2). In 1921, 'Visva-Bharati' turned into an internationally important place where 'the world makes its home in a single nest' through the convergence of two distinctly thought - the traditional beliefs of east and progressive ideologies of west. Consequently, many eminent foreign faculties have come and contributed in fulfilling his vision (Arnson, 1978).

7.3. Rathindranath's Period (Rabindranath's Son) (1941-1952):

After the death of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, his son Rathindranath took over the responsibility of his father at Santiniketan. Most of the *Ashrama* complex was preserved in time with the addition of Rabindra Bhavana as a museum. This period ends with the formulation of Visva-Bharati as a national level university under an Act of Parliament in 1951 (Bandopadhyay, 2007).

7.4. Formal University Period (1952-2023):

Visva-Bharati being a Central University has followed the day-to-day rules and regulations, formulated by the University Grants Commission (UGC) since 1956.

7.5. Era of World Heritage Site (After 2023):

Santiniketan was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List on September 17, 2023, during the 45th session in Riyadh, making it the 41st World Heritage Site in India.

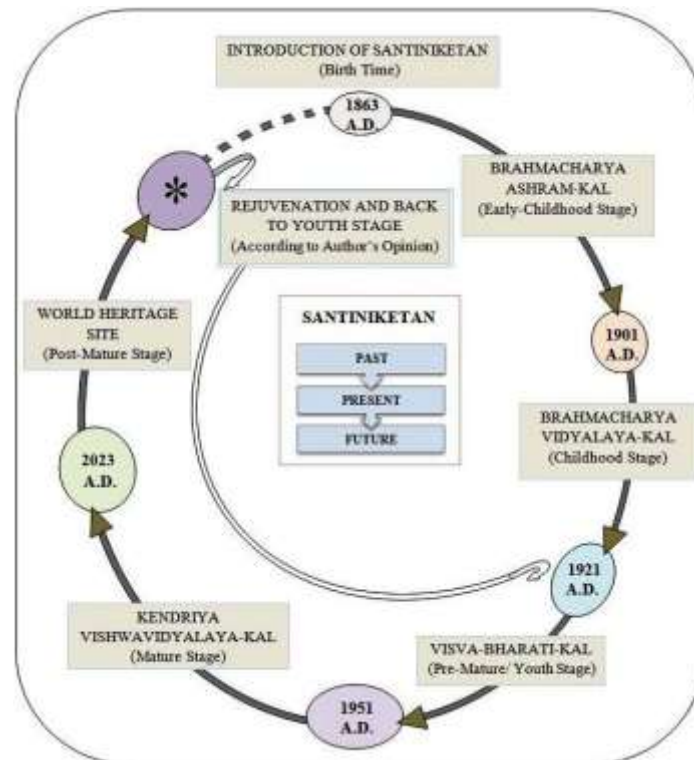


Figure-3: Journey of Santiniketan (1863-2023)

(Source: Prepared by the Researcher)

8. Some Importance Aspects related to Historical Journey of Santiniketan:

8.1 Significance of *Chhatim* Tree - the Heritage Plant of Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati:

During 1863, the present location of Visva-Bharati was an absolute barren land near the village known as Bhubandanga with lush green rice paddy fields bordered by rows of wild date, palms and *Chhatim* (locally known as “*Chhatim*” or “*Soptoporni*”) trees. In that year, Debendranath Tagore, father of Rabindranath, sat in a glade of *Chhatim* trees to take his rest and complete his evening prayers (see vide plate-3). He was filled with so much peace and happiness, after finishing his meditation. Thereafter, he soon bought 20 bighas (2.676 hectares) of land from the landlord of Raipur to set up a spiritual meditation centre there and named it as Santiniketan (“abode of peace”). Later, Rabindranath Tagore expanded the area and established the Visva-Bharati University (Natesh, 2017). On the basis of it, *Chhatim* (*Saptaparna*) tree is considered as ‘*Bodhibriksha*’ (Gautam Buddha had made his meditation in such a sacred tree) of Santiniketan (Acharya, 2010).



Plate-3



Plate-4

Plate-3: Chhatimtala and its environs; Plate-4: Close view of Chhatimtala, one of the auspicious places of Santiniketan (Source: Photographs taken by researcher)

The spot where the ancient *Chhatim* trees stood was named *Chhatimtala* and it soon became a favourite of Gurudev as well. Consequently, *Chhatimtala* symbolizes the genesis of Santiniketan and is, hence, the sacred place on the campus (see vide plate-4). It is because of this reason in Visva-Bharati, Prayers are held there and a bunch of seven *Saptaparna* leaves are given as a token to every graduating student to honour this worship on the Convocation Day (Pal, 2013).

8.2 Role of Community People in the History of Santiniketan:

Specification of Human beings in respect to the development of Santiniketan:

- Tagore's family-** Started by *Maharshi* along with most of the family members (See the fig.4 for details).
- Raipur Sinha's family-** Introduction of Santiniketan had been completed in the land of Raipur's landlord (see vide fig.1 for details).
- Foreigners (outsiders of India)-** Following peoples have visited Santiniketan and contributed to develop the cultural sphere of Santiniketan in loads. W.W. Pearson (1914 - 1923), C. F. Andrews (1914 - 1940), Sylvain Lavi (1921 - 1922), Patrick Geddes and his son Arthur Geddes (1921 - 1923), L. K. Elmhirst (1921 - 1925) and his wife Dorothy Straight, M. Winternitz (1922 - 1923), Kintaro Kasahara (1922 - 1927) and his family, Miss Gretchen Green (1922 - 1924), Harry Garland Timbers (1929 - 1934) and his wife Rebecca Timbers, Andre Karpele (1922), Miss Stella Kramrisch (1922), V. Lesvy (1923), S. Flacum (1923), Sten Konow (1924 - 1925) and his wife, C. Formichi and J. Tucci (1925 - 1926), B. W. Tucker (1927 - 1934), Tan Yun-shan (1924 - 1978), Alex Aronson (1937 - 1944), M. Sykes (1939), M. Collins, J. B. Pratt etc. were a few of them (Debnath, 2010).

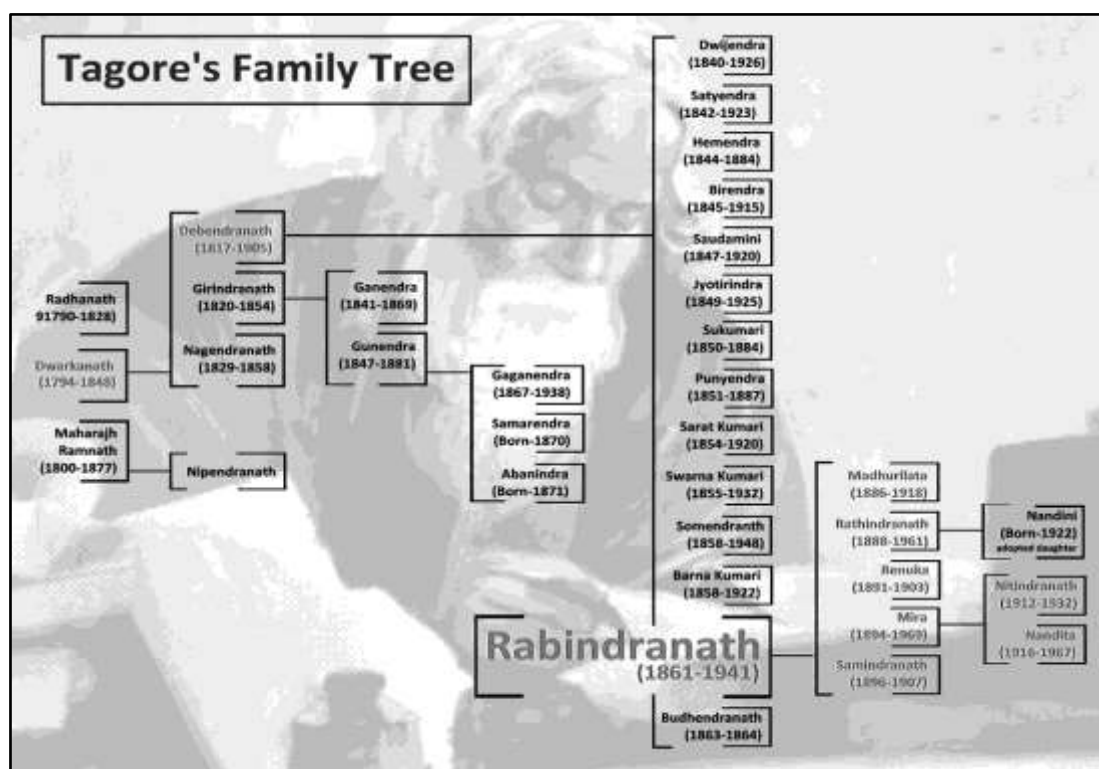


Figure-4: Tagore's family Members

(Source: <http://www.csl.nic.in/publication/other/tributetogurudev.pdf>)

d) **Others-** Santiniketan has expanded due to lands of Zamindars of Surul and Taltor and the activities of Santiniketan had performed here through financial as well as intellectual support from many peoples in and around Santiniketan (Acharya, 2010).

9. Conclusion:

The historical occurrences that paved the way for Santiniketan to reach its current splendour are the main subject of the research. Rabindranath Tagore's life and principles are intricately entwined with the history of Santiniketan. It represents a distinctive fusion of tradition and modernity, spirituality and reason, local roots and global outreach, and has evolved from a tranquil ashram in rural Bengal to a worldwide renowned centre of learning and creativity. Santiniketan is still a live example of Tagore's ideas about education and intercultural harmony. Santiniketan's historical landscape is a living legacy rather than merely a reflection of the past that is recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. It still provides insightful lessons on how culture and education may coexist peacefully with the environment and how idealistic thinking can create a society based on harmony.

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