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Sriniketan's Co-operatives: The possibilites and dilemmas of Viswabharati's Globality*

Pradip Kumar Datta**

In his famous, caustic comment, Prasanto Mahalanobis limited the usefulness of Sriniketan, the rural "reconstruction" wing of Viswabharati, to providing eggs and milk to the bhadralok students who studied in Santinketan, the university wing of the same institution.[1] Mahalanobis was a leading member of the Viswabharati administration and for several years its financial architect (he later had a notable career as the head of the Planning Commission under Nehru), so the comment may be seen as symptomatic of a larger (and possibly continuing) perception of the hierarchy between Santiniketan and Sriniketan. This is a hierarchy that coincides with the pronounced global concerns of Santiniketan and the local concerns of livelihood and village welfare with Sriniketan.[2] The conception of Sriniketan as an appendage to Santiniketan prevents a recognition of its constitutive place in Viswabharati's globality. It also raises a fundamental question about the hierarchies that structure globality, a concern to which I will return later.

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[1] Mahalanobis also reductively defined the aim of Sriniketan when he said it was "too charitable", Letter dt. 24.08. 1923, File No.1, 107 (i), Leonard K. Elmhirst, Rabindra Bhavan Archives.

[2] This is true even for those appreciative of Sriniketan's achievements. Thus Krishna Kripalani observes that the only two real contributions of Viswabharati were Kala Bhaban and Sriniketan but then immediately proceeds to put the latter in its place by saying that it had nothing to contribute to the intellect, 'Santiniketan: A Dream' *Viswabharati News*, V. I, N. II, August 1933.

It is true, of course, that serious commentators of Sriniketan have remarked on its global basis. Sudhir Sen, an expert who left his job in Milan to join Sriniketan, observed that Sriniketan was thoroughly global because the inspiration came from Rabindranath, the management and start-up was done by L.K. Elmhirst, an Englishman, while the financial support came from Mrs. Dorothy Straight, the American wife of Elmhirst.[3] To this may be added the fact that the deal through which Rabindranath bought property in Surul village, the site of Sriniketan, was conducted in Ealing, a neighbourhood in London, while Elmhirst was first contacted by Rabindranath in New York to take charge of the operations. Such instances may be multiplied, but what may be more interesting is the need to recognize the difference with Santiniketan as well. It is necessary to see Sriniketan as representing another—and intertwined—mode of globality.

It is time now to define globality. It is different from its cognate term "Globalization" by the fact that it does not simply describe a process of intensified time space compression of global interactions. Globality refers to alternate modes of global habitation based on dissatisfactions with the dominant processes of globalisation driven by Capital.[4] It is a practical imaginary that seeks, through critique of dominant global processes of integration on the one hand and the generation of living and discursive practices on the other hand, to produce alternate global habitations. In a sense it refers to experimental habitations, the grounds of which are produced by globalization, but which—through willed acts of intervention—seek to produce different principles to anchor processes of global interconnectedness. Many of these attempts, such as Viswabharati, are constituted by locally produced communities that are closer to the traditions of modern

[3] Sudhir Sen observes [although one may have reservations about the application of the categories he uses] that "In a unique way it [Sriniketan] has combined Indian philosophy, British enterprise and American finance." Rabindranath Tagore on 'Rural Reconstruction and Community Development in India', Calcutta; Viswabharati, 1991, f. pub. 1943, pp. 155–56.

[4] For Rabindranath's critique of capitalist accumulation and its relationship with the nation state, see Pradip Kumar Datta, 'Revisiting Rabindranath, Thinking the global', in *Heterogeneities: Identity formations in modern India,* N. Delhi: Tulika, 2010.

community-making such as Robert Owen's New Lanark in England and the many communities that were formed in nineteenth-century America, among others. Here, I must also spell out the difference with cosmopolitanism. While Nussbaum's influential definition of cosmopolitanism is based on the relationship of the Self to the World (contained in the idea of the citizen of the world),[5] Viswabharati's conception is based on how the *Self* relates to its *Other*. This makes global interactions specific to different sites of interaction since the nature of both Self and Other change according to the locations in which they are placed. It follows from this that globality is not singular but is a term that refers to multiple initiatives across the world in building world communities and hence is constitutively heterogeneous. It is through this lens that I have elsewhere tried to understand facets of Viswabharati. Here I will address the world of Sriniketan.

This returns me to Rabindranath's concern with the surrounding villages of Santiniketan. This preoccupation stemmed from an acknowledgement of its depressed and poor condition; something that was accompanied by his recognition of the danger of instrumentalising the villagers. He told Elmhirst that he was unhappy that Santiniketan had no "intimate contact" with surrounding villages "inside their own communities" but simply sourced them for "menial tasks in my school".[6] At another place he defined intellectual and aesthetic work that disregarded the poor as a form of parasitism.[7] The nature of his ethical commitment appears to have sprung from a sense of neighbourliness: he asked Elmhirst in their first meeting, whether the young man would help in finding out why the surrounding villages of his academic institution were suffering and if he would be prepared to live in a village in order to do so. The force of Rabindranath's commitment to his rural neighbours is defined by the fact that the intensely depressed nature

[5] See an elaboration of her position in Martha C. Nussbaum, "Kant and Cosmopolitanism", in *The Cosmopolitanism Reader,* Gareth Wallace Brown and David Held, eds. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.
[6] Elmhirst, L.K. *Poet and the Plowman*, Kolkata: Viswabharati, rpt. 2008, f. pub. 1975) p. 2.
[7] Cited in Ajit Neogy, *The Twin Dreams of Rabindranath Tagore: Santinketan and Sriniketan*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2010, p.110.

of these villages provided obviously unfavourable conditions for achieving easy success in an experiment in rural reconstruction.[8]

For Rabindranath, the commitment to neighbourly responsibility had its roots in the reconstructive activities he undertook in his zamindari from the 1890s. These early efforts were driven by a patriotic urge to reanimate the villages of India,[9] which for him constituted the true reality, the "swadeshi samaj" of the country.[10] What is significant in the Viswabharati phase is that the patriotic lineage of his commitment resonated with Elmhirst's commitment to international good will. Elmhirst had already visited and worked in India in the second decade of the twentieth century. This period had coincided with his criticism of the war, during which time he read and admired Gitanjali.[11] For Elmhirst,

[8] Sen writes that he was struck by the "dreary environment" of Sriniketan: this was in the 1930s!, *Rural Reconstruction*, op. cit, p. 9. He also adds that if the same effort had been invested in another part of Bengal, it would have fetched "far more solid results", op. cit. p.152. Pannalal Dasgupta, a late Gandhian activist, thinks that Sriniketan was chosen because of Rabindranath's trust of difficult assignments. This does not seem to borne out by Rabindranath's own reflections on the matter. "Pratham Sanskaraner Bhumika [Introduction to the first edition]", Satyadas Chakrabarty, *Sriniketaner Gorar Katha [Sriniketan's Early Period],* Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 2001, first pub. 1985.

[9] Although it should be added here that as early as 1907 he sent his son Rathindranath together with two others, to the USA to study agriculture.

[10] As is well known Rabindranath delivered an address on the need to initiate a country-wide rural programme in his lecture on "Swadeshi Samaj", "*Swadeshi Samaj" Rachanabali*, Kolkata: Viswabharati rpt.1415, bhadra, 1311 and in a more detailed way in his address to the Provincial Conference of the Congress in 1908, "Sabhapatir Abhibhashan: Pabna Pradeshik Sammilani", *Samuha: Rachanabali,* vol. V. Kolkata: Viswabharati, rpt. 1415.

[11] Elmhirst, the son of a Yorkshire preacher, rejected the Church because its priests supported the war. He joined the YMCA and worked for it in Ahmadnagar where he lived like a Sahib but at the same time longed to come out into the midst of the artisans. He later broke with the YMCA and worked as Secretary to Lionel Curtis who played a key role in drafting the Montford Reforms. Elmhirst read *Gitanjali* in 1915 and was completely entranced by it. He met Rabindranath though the mediation of two friends, Sam Higginbottom, a missionary who had started an agricultural settlement in Allahabad and Mrs. William Moody, a trustee of Cornell University where Elmhirst was studying agriculture when Rabindranath first met him. Michael Young, *The Elmhirsts of Dartington: The Creation of an Utopian Community,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, pp. 21–29 and pp. 163–65.

international goodwill was not simply embodied in the ease of person to person relationships, cultural contacts and so on alone, but involved ensuring the necessities of life to all.[12] At the same time, it is important to note here that Rabindranath did not want Elmhirst to settle down in India; indeed he did not want him to learn Bangla because that would dissuade him from imparting his skills to local activists. And, Rabindranath was clear that Indians themselves had to understand the villages and their inhabitants.[13]

We have here a globality that seeks to transform the material conditions of a relatively settled poor—while making middle class Indians understand their importance and the need to relate to them. This marks it out from the globality of Santiniketan which is directed towards producing a shared process of cultural interactions that could provide the basis of co-operative relations between different parts of the world. While this is obvious, certain other elements must also be reckoned with. The first is that the relationship with the rural poor is not just one of economic betterment alone. The phrase that both Rabindranath and Elmhirst used to describe their project was "Village Reconstruction", something that connotes a comprehensive ethic of renewal. In a draft letter, Rabindranath described their aim to conduct "living work comprehending village life in all its various activities and not merely productive of analytical knowledge".[14] Let me immediately clarify that this aim did not exile scientific knowledge but simply sought

[12] Letter from Elmhirst, 02.10.21, File No.1, 107 (i), Elmhirst, Leonard K., Rabindra Bhavan Archives.

[13] Rabindranath told him that if he learnt the language he would become like a missionary and visit villages alone; he instructed him to always take a local person so that they could learn what questions to ask of villagers and how to ask them, L.K.Elmhirst, "The Foundation of Sriniketan", *Pioneer in Education: Rabindranath Tagore*, *http://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/tagore.*pdf accessed 04.03.2013, p. 9.

[14] Rabindranath told him that, "You rightly named your work Village Reconstruction Work for it was a living work comprehending village life in all its various activities, and not merely productive of analytic knowledge." *Pioneer in Education*, op.cit, p.13. By this he meant an intuitive and sympathetic connection that would include scientific knowledge and that would enable the capacity to understand the different and interconnected elements of village life.

to embed it in the context of other ways of knowing village life, a process of knowing that would also derive from affect and physical labour.[15] The comprehensive range of faculties deployed would allow an understanding of village life in all its inter-relationships, thereby preparing the grounds for engaging in a comprehensive range of activities that ranged from the economic to the social and cultural. But this also involved an attempt to rework the relationship between activists and villagers, something that was not necessarily implied in the desire to better the material conditions of poor villages. It is a project that is suggested by Rabindranath's realization, mentioned above, that they lacked "intimate contact" with the villagers. This is a point to which I will return shortly.

Before that let me briefly sketch out the Sriniketan programme. The initiative at Surul started with road repair and attempts to educate villagers about malaria, but Surul rapidly spawned a sophisticated administrative machinery with six departments in the 1930s.[16] These included laboratory work and experiments with foreign technologies, seeds, poultry and animals. Indeed, the work at Surul was itself envisaged as some kind of a gigantic initiative in applied experimental science. A cherished objective of Sriniketan was to provide a process through which village problems would be taken to the class room for study and thence to the experimental farms for a solution.[17] New trades were also sought to be introduced while attempts were made to reorganize and extend existing trades such as leather work and

[15] Elmhirst recalls that Rabindranath told him that he did not approve of the "kingdom of the Expert" who deployed the "cool aloofness" of science but wanted the application of science to specific problems; the identification of the problems and the solutions would stem from the quality of "imaginative sympathy". Op. cit, pp.12–13. To this must also be added the idea that science was also important in providing training in a new attitude to experimentation that would correspond to creativity in the commitment to newness. In a letter to Elmhirst, Rabindranath wrote, "Our people need more than anything else a real scientific training that can inspire in them the courage of experiment and the initiative of mind, which we lack as a nation.", *Pioneer in…,* op. cit, p.19.
[16] For the following account I have drawn on Dikshit Sinha, "Rabindranath o Shanitiketan", Gaurimohon Mitra Sankalita, Birbhumer Itihas Akhanda Sanskaran, Arun Chaudhury, ed. Siuri, Rarh, 2005.
[17] Viswabharati, Annual Report, 1923.

handicrafts. At the same time, there was an attempt at cultural revival that would introduce joy into rural life through *jatras, kathakatas*, the innovation of new festivals and so on. All these activities were crucial elements what Rabindranath called *atmashakti* (self-empowerment). Indeed, Dikshit's book on Sriniketan, that is its most authoritative source, notes that Sriniketan had three objectives: *atmashakti*, co-operatives and development.

Sriniketan was designed as an autonomous and comprehensive "agricultural settlement". This ambition was a part of Rabindranath's professed ambition of trying to re-engineer the life of only one or two villages so that they would become models of inspiration for the rest of the country.[18] While this exemplary mode was certainly important, the activities of Sriniketan extended it through their reach. It catered to Hindu, Muslim and Santhal villages. Besides having about five santhal villages under its direct supervision, it also looked after 25–30 villages in the immediate vicinity where health and credit co-operatives were set up in addition to conducting routine welfare work. The institute also undertook detailed surveys, a notable instance of which was the survey of about three hundred villages that was serviced by the Viswabharati Credit Society. In short, there was an attempt at producing a spillover of Sriniketan, a mode in which the exemplary effort overflowed into practices of osmosis through which it affected partial elements of villages outside its immediate ambit of attention.[19]

In all this can be sensed a fundamentally different way in which globality operates. Santiniketan's globality was premised on a horizontal interflow of cultural exchanges between the East and the West: it promised to provide a location in which the processes of globality could be designed to intersect and the shape of the interactions guided.

[18] Rabindranath wrote to Elmhirst the following in letter dated 21.12.1937: "If we can give a start to a few villages, they would perhaps be an inspiration to some others—and my life work will have been done", cited in *Pioneer in...*, op. cit, p. 19.

[19] I should add that there was no China Wall between these two modes. Villagers could themselves conduct demonstrations which were found to be much more effective than setting up State demonstration farms. Elmhirst, *Pioneer in...*, op. cit, p. 21.

On the other hand, Sriniketan was conceived to concentrate the transformative powers of globality in a circumscribed area from where it could expand outwards. Globality was meant to transform the local life of rural India by producing a model that would inspire and spread.

Most importantly, to elaborate a point made earlier, it afforded the possibility of resolving a structural problem in globality itself. This was the need to transform the world across class divides. The same class condition of Santiniketan made it easier to provide a horizontal plane of global interactions. On the other hand, Sriniketan was grounded on an inherited class distinction between the middle class and the peasants which fashioned the plane on which self and other would relate in this mode of globality.

The problems of this relationship were intensified by the commitment to empowering the poor not just as economic subjects as also ones that had to possess the capacity for dignity and for exercising rights. Consequently, the dilemmas of social asymmetry had to be faced squarely. These sprang from the assumption that the bhadralok elite together with activists from the West were the initiators of reconstructing the condition of villagers on the one hand and the commitment to making the poor empowered subjects who would themselves claim justice and fashion their lives to liberate themselves from poverty on the other hand.[20] The members of the Sriniketan establishment were no socialists, but they aimed at empowering the poor as agents. It was a problem that was structural to a society-in-making in which the normative commitment to democracy and egalitarian ethics had to work with the embedded and stubborn hierarchies that structured that society. Such

[20] Elmhirst puts this succinctly when he writes that the peasants, "by helping themselves, keep and increase their own self-respect and slowly achieve a new and more potent command over their generally tragic and poverty-stricken environment". "The foundation of Sriniketan", *Pioneer in…*, op. cit, p.11. However Rabindranath went beyond this to look for the impact of self-empowerment not just on nature but on relationships with social superiors which involved the exercise of right to better and more equal conditions of life. Elmhirst adds that zamindars remained suspicious despite the best efforts of Sriniketan activists, clearly guessing that peasant self-empowerment would do them no good. Ibid, p. 11.

a society posed the following question: how can one relate from a position of undeniable social superiority to social inferiors without replicating the social asymmetry in another form? This was a problem that would dog the efforts of institutions such as Sriniketan even more since they also sought a more symmetrical relationship with the West in a period of colonial domination. In short, Sriniketan posed the problem of democratic ethics in a society with multiple hierarchies.

This dilemma was inherited from Rabindranath's past. We can see it in his experiences as an 'improving' zamindar promoting the welfare of his tenants. Dikshit Sinha argues that Rabindranath's efforts at rural work started in 1897 and covered a large scattered area over three phases. Between 1899–1906 Rabindranath experimented with new kinds of cultivation and crops in Selaidaha (Pabna district) while in 1905 he established a bank to ensure credit to farmers in both Selaidaha and Patisar (in Nadia); also Rathindranath, his son, returned from the USA—where he, along with two others, had been sent by his father to study agricultural science—to establish a laboratory on eighty acres in the Selaidaha estate. Between 1908–09, Rabindranath engaged in comprehensive development work in Birhampur village at Selaidaha and was joined by other activists, notably Kalimohon Ghosh who later played a crucial role in Sriniketan. The third phase covers 1915 to 1940: it was centred in Kaligram Pargana in Patisar. During this period tractors were regularly used for cultivation, roads were built, pisciculture introduced, wells were dug while 200 primary schools and three hospitals among others were set up.[21] In short this was a reduced version of the comprehensive programme designed for Sriniketan.

While this represented a remarkable range of activities, it did not resolve certain structural problems of selfhood, or more appositely, of unwilled self-division—for Rabindranath. The first of these related to questions of property and market demands. Committed as he was to the belief that individual wealth accumulation was indissociable from inequality and the growth of poverty, Rabindranath remained divided about his status as a zamindar. In his Pabna address, he talked of the

[21] Sinha, Dikshit, pp. 19–20.

early glory of the zamindar which lay in discharging his responsibilities by being generous with *dana* (donations), maintaining roads, wells and so on,[22] an indication of the fact that Rabindranath was not averse to supporting the figure of a liberal zamindar, which is what he had in fact become. Indeed, it is this figure that can be seen to provide the inspiration for a popular patriarch which he advocates in Swadeshi Samaj to propagate unity to the nation.[23] However, he also had deep reservations about zamindari itself, since he also acknowledged (often ironically) that zamindari was a business and as such prevented taking certain initiatives to better the peasant condition.[24] Hence he claimed that he had wished to look after his land as a temporary trustee for his tenants, but that he was unable to do so by the nature of the zamindari business and the huge debt that it had incurred.[25] Implicit in this regret was a radical disbelief in the property holding authority of the zamindar himself.[26] And yet he was profoundly distrustful of the market since he understood that surrendering his land to the tenants would simply mean the perpetuation of the zamindari system, for now there would be multiple zamindars instead of a single one; further, an open market in land would also pose the danger of moneylenders buying up the land.[27]

The deep disbelief in his status as zamindar even as he sought to alleviate it by engaging in welfare activities, was intensified by the

[22] "Sabhapatir Abhibhashan: Pabna Pradeshik Sammilani", *Samuha: Rachanabali, Vol V.,* Kolkata: Viswabharati, rpt. 1415.
[23] "Swadeshi Samaj" (bhadra, 1311[1904]) *Rachanabali*, Kolkata: Viswabharati rpt.1415 [2008].
[24] "The dharma of wealth is inequality. Those desirous of wealth produce poverty in their own interest", cited in Amitava Chaudhury, *Jamidar Rabindranath*, Calcutta: Ashok Mukhopdhyaya, 1402, f. pub 1383]), p. 19.
[25] Letter to Protima Debi cited in Amitava Chaudhury, *Jamidar Rabindranath*, Calcutta: Ashok Mukhopdhyaya, 1402, f. pub 1383, p. 27.
[26] After his Russian visit, Rabindranath said that he believed that land belonged to the tiller and to the zamindar (and also that co-operative farming was an absolute necessity), ibid, p. 21.
[27] See Amitava Chaudhury, *Jamidar Rabindranath*, Calcutta: Ashok Mukhopdhyaya, 1402, f. pub 1383, pp. 21–4. For a contrary view of Rabindranath's views on land relations, see Bhabotosh Datta, "Tagore and the Economics of Rural Development", *The Viswabharati Quarterly* (Pulinbehari Sen Memorial Number), Vol. 48, Nos 1–4, May 1982 – April 1983.

problems of recognition. It may be recalled that he was cut off from his native society for seven years (1891–08) and his real people-to-people connections could only be with his tenants. He did try to relate to them directly: in his morning walks he would stand and talk to many of them.[28] There were even more spectacular acts that announced his commitment to social equality: hence he refused to sit on a level that was higher than that of his tenants which was resented by his managers.[29] But such acts were also shot through with unresolvable dilemmas. He could not produce the relationship of symmetry he desired. He was painfully aware that his tenants related to him as a zamindar and that he had to enact that role to meet their expectations. He was condemned to be a mask.[30] This also implied, as he clearly understood, that he had to be ethically committed to a position in which he could begin work only by accepting the distance that separated him from the peasants and the distrust that was historically structured into the relationship.[31] But paradoxically he could not also realize the possibility that the distrust would not be of irresponsible zamindars, but of zamindars themselves. Hence in another situation he reports that his peasants refused to contribute to the making of a pond since they said he would be the main beneficiary. Rabindranath explains this opposition by the dependent mentality of the peasants which did not allow them to enter schemes to empower themselves.[32] The possibility of class suspicion did not arise in his mind. In short, Rabindranath was caught in a willed dilemma. A commitment to a relationship of productive and symmetrical interaction with his tenants, placed him in a cross-fire of conflicting imperatives and acknowledgements. These, at many points, led him to a state of confusion about his self and the otherness of the tenants.

Sriniketan can be seen as an attempt to resolve this problem of producing an egalitarian ethics of welfarism across social hierarchies.

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[28] Raychaudhury, Sudhakanta, "Rabindranath o Gram", *Udichi 04 paus*, 1386, pp. 28–9.
[29] *Jamidar Rabindranath*, op. cit, pp. 39–42.
[30] Chinnapatrabali cited in *Jamidar Rabindranath*, op. cit, pp. 30–1.
[31] Ibid, p.19.
[32] *Jamidar Rabindranath*, op. cit, pp. 78–9.

Its overall objectives are well summed up in Rabindranath's collection of essays on co-operatives called *Samabayniti*. He says here that he did not wish to follow the conventional principles of *dana* or *seva* (service), thereby clearly ruling out the modes of patronage or of service, both of which in different ways, preserve social hierarchies.[33] To be noted is the new institutional shape in which the fresh attempts are mounted. There are two crucial elements, that of public authority and pedagogy, that insert it within the overall aims of globality in order to resolve the problematic. Sriniketan is of course a public trust with clearly worked out organizational hierarchies that removes the figure of the zamindar together with the oppressive machinery of *amla*s, managers and so on. More importantly, it is this design that allows Sriniketan to attempt to produce an interstitial location between state and market, drawing on both of them while asserting its autonomy and regulating their contributions and influence. It is this location that also allows Sriniketan to pull in activists from both foreign countries as well as from other parts of India, to produce its own mode of globality. But even more interesting is the attempt to define Sriniketan as an extended mode of pedagogy. Admittedly the discourse on this is not very precise. The Annual Report states that the aim of education was not simply an academic one but was designed to bring it "into intimate relationship with the realities of Indian life". It then goes on to specify this by initiatives in rural reconstruction which would draw on the principle mentioned above, of village–class room–experimental farm to solve the problems of village life — in addition to promoting various forms of associational life.[34]

The objectives of the Annual Report must be glossed by Rabindranath's view that education should be located within society and tied to it through "the living bonds of varied co-operations"; that it must have an "organic connection with its surroundings". This is an interesting formulation when we brush it against the theories generated within Santiniketan that conceived the world of education as replicating

[33] "Samabay 2", *Samabayniti, Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol XIV, 1329, rpt. 1919.
[34] "Viswabharati Programme", *Annual Report 1923,* Viswabharati progs No. 2, Part I.

the adult world.[35] What Sriniketan represents is an inversion of this principle by which pedagogy is moved out and into the lifeworld of social practices in order to modify them. In other words, this extended conception of pedagogy also provides a way of using an institutional conception that allows a society to produce — in the modern model of unequal relations between generations, between adult and child — a temporary hierarchy that would seek to dissolve itself over time. This notion of pedagogy offers a possible, and an impossible, solution to Rabindranath's dilemma which, of course, has more general reverberations. This is important to note since Rabindranath retains his acknowledge of working with hierarchies — although he does it through a route that may seem a derivative of his more patriarchal models of intervention. Rabindranath assumes that there is an asymmetry between the recognition that the powerful and wealth bestow on the peasant and the peasants' self-recognition. The peasant state of dependency and helplessness is shaped by the zamindar's assumption of a superordinate status, if not contempt for the peasant. It is hence the socially superior classes that must take the initiative to restore a sense of self-confidence and self-possession to the peasant. This would not however amount to an act of ethical charity. The recognition of the peasant must also seek to dissolve the condition of hierarchy which is its starting point — an enterprise that the form of co-operative work would obviously reinforce. In other words, co-operatives would be an important component in an intervention based on a self-dissolving hierarchy.

But let me qualify my argument. I have pointed out elsewhere that Rabindranath was committed to a process rather than a determinate end and this was true of his pedagogic practices as well as his social understanding. Rabindranath's experiment can be described as such: it really aims to supply a new foundational principle without attempting to produce a telos through it. It is in this sense that he understood Sriniketan as a creative effort. He wrote to Elmhirst that it was a "work

[35] An article by Boyd Tucker laid down that education should be a part of life rather than a preparation for life. Hence it should provide a place of interaction rather than the handing down of knowledge,"Siksha-Bhavan: The College Section", *Viswabharati News*, Vol.1. No. 3, September 1932.

of creation" since it did not follow a textbook but improvised according to the hurdles that it had to face and overcome.[36] It is this that makes the dilemmas a constitutive element of the institution of Sriniketan itself. And it is in the light of the dilemma indicated above that I will concentrate on an understanding of co-operatives, an institution that was critical to this extended pedagogic activism of Sriniketan and posed this dilemma in its sharpest and most productive ways.

II

From what I have said so far it is clear that the globality of Sriniketan is a difficult enterprise. Clearly globality is not a magic brush that can replace the old world by a new. Globality has to struggle with the living and shaping hands of the past, the deeply embedded problems of social relationships that build internal resistances to new schemes of renewal. The point however is that globality does not simply present stories of how things do not really change despite a new discourse, or simple narratives of recuperations of hierarchies in a new modern style. The presence of the transformative effects of globality cannot be denied and this results in a story of struggles, negotiations and suspended resolutions. It is precisely for this reason that I have chosen to concentrate on co-operatives, for these embodied the most ambitious and influential programme of global transformation of some villages in India.

A significant feature of co-operatives is that they are derived from the more general principle of co-operation.[37] Rabindranath termed the principle of co-operatives as *samabayniti*. This is derived from the *niti* traditions of governance that are weighed in favour of realistic policies rather than the transcendental principle of *dharma* from which are derived foundational ideas of social and moral orders. This is important to understand the orientation of co-operatives although for Rabindranath, the ethical is very much a part of this — worldly "real". I will look at the Samabayniti essays in some detail later, but at this

[36] Letter to Elmhirst, dtd April 18, 1923, cited in *Pioneer in…*, op. cit, p. 16.
[37] A Viswabharati report on the functioning of co-ops stated that co-ops strengthen "spirit of co-operation".

point I wish to draw attention to some of the ways in which the hyphenated word co-operation was used by the Viswabharati establishment. Let me recall that Rabindranath posited the principle of co-operation against the competitive principle believed to be foundational to nationalism.[38] The personalized ethic of globality contained in the idea of co-operation is one that is signaled by his letter to Elmhirst in which he says that the spirit of co-operation– together with friendship and love—were the basis of Man which could survive the Nation itself.[39] At another place, Rabindranath talks about sharing the "intimacy of a joint creation" to Elmhirst.[40] These two sets of statements nicely bring together the idea of shared activity present in the meaning of co-operation together with the personal relationship forged in the process of work. This is a notion of co-operation that was extended into the discourse of international co-activity. When *Viswabharati News* declares that the institution has emerged as a centre for intellectual and cultural co-operation between India and China, it must be remembered that this co-operation worked through a few individuals in China and not through state institutions. There is yet another shade of meaning to co-operation in Rabindranath's nostalgic reflection that his relationship with Elmhirst was one as one of co-operation between individuals with different and, hence, complementary capabilities.[41] What we have here is a notion of completing the self through complementary relationships with the other. This use of co-operation can be glossed usefully by an article by a visiting missionary activist on "Siksha Bhavan: The College section"

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[38] He puts the alternatives starkly: " The problem is whether the different groups of peoples shall go on fighting with one another or find out some true basis of reconciliation and mutual help; whether it will be interminable competition or cooperation", "Nationalism in India", *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Two*, N. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2004, f. pub.1996, p. 254.

[39] Letter from Rabindranath to Elmhirst, dtd. 02.06.40, File No.1, 107 (i), Leonard K. Elmhirst, Rabindra Bhavan Archives.

[40] Letter from Rabindranath to Elmhirst, dtd. 21.10.1926, cited in *Pioneer in...,* op. cit, p. 17.

[41] In a letter to Elmhirst, Rabindranath dwelt on their friendship, talking about the limitations of institutionalization and need for "direct co-operation" which rests on "knowing that our capacities being different could bring great results by their combined efforts." Letter to LKE, 08.07.34, Rabindra Bhavan Archives.

regarding which he says that Viswabharati could avoid the dangers of sectarianism precisely because it did not look for a common denominator since it operated on principles of co-operation.[42] Co-operation needs to work through the productivity of difference.[43]

Co-operatives, within the framework of the principles of co-operation, could be understood as the determinate form in which local life could be collectively organized. Co-operatives could be the basic social cells that would form the basis for global co-operation itself. If this were so, then co-operatives can be seen to provide a resolution to Rabindranath's search for an adequate community form itself to embody the primacy of the "social" which he identified as the necessary antidote to the "political" phenomenon of the nation. Earlier he had identified two institutions that could embody a social community. The weak one was that of caste which had clearly outlived its use since it had frozen boundaries and mutual interactions, although it was a palpable index of a society in which wealth was bounded by social authority and hence curbed competition. The second model was that of Swadeshi Samaj in which he argued for a modern nation-wide organization for transforming the material and cultural lives of people, but operating under the aegis of popular patriarch who would embody the popular will. In contrast to both, co-operatives offered a democratic and global alternative. Its global form was one that was obviously superior to the bounded worlds of caste. At the same time it was a community form that was based in equal measure on the values of the individual and of social bonds, thereby divesting the community of the

[42] Tucker, B.W., "Shiksha Bhavan: The college section" V.1, 3, Sept. 32, Viswabharati Library.

[43] I should add that this also posed a dilemma. A commentator of Viswabharati says that the problem of students coming from many provinces is that of provincialism; however, he adds, this is averted by sharing a common language, that of Bangla. E.W. Araniyakam, "Siksha Vibhag", *Viswabharati News*, Vol. 1. No. 2, Aug. 1932. While this argument tends to wish away the problem of difference, it can also be seen to be a problem with any inter-provincial and global habitation since it poses the problem of reconciling the difference within the global with the need to communicate across this difference; it can also be seen to underline the importance of seeing global habitation in the plural.

burden of hierarchy and unfreedom that were almost regularly attached to the warmth of its bondings.

However, precisely because of its non-hierarchical expectations, the practices of co-operatives posed the problem of hierarchy even more sharply. But it did so in more interesting, productive and diverse ways than that of caste or patriarchal empowerment of the community. Interesting, because co-operatives provide a clear opportunity for Rabindranath's ethic of self-empowerment to be actualized, even while underlining the problems and negotiations that this involves. Productive, because co-operatives align the ethical with the economic: co-operatives promise both a new sense of self in relationship to its others, as well as new forms and volumes of material productivity that the self can engage in. Indeed, for Rabindranath, while the West had achieved co-operation in social relationships, it had failed to do so in economic relations, and this is what co-operatives were meant to address.[44] Finally, it is diverse because, as I will show, it impacts on many spheres of the village reconstruction programme. I have already mentioned the notion of comprehensiveness; co-operatives are the key institution that provides the weave that can stitch together the main concerns of village reconstruction.

In the collection of articles on co-operatives entitled *Samabayniti*, Rabindranath defined the condition of villages by elements of individuation, poverty and powerlessness.[45] His starting point is an ethical one: the peasant lacks belief in his own capacities, he has no self-trust, a condition that was the outcome of individuation. This could be addressed through co-operatives which would knit the individual peasants into a community and afford the most extensive form of community life. Through its economic activities, co-operatives would embed the peasant into the circles of global connections. Globality would grow organically as it were, through ever expanding circles of

[44] "Co-operation and our Destiny", *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, *Vol. IV: A Miscellany*, Nityapriya Ghosh, ed., New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, f. pub. 2007, p. 385.
[45] I have drawn for the following account on "Samabayniti", *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. XIV, Calcutta: Viswabharati.

collective interactions — which, parenthetically, fulfills the objective of completeness. The expanding connections of co-operatives would provide a parallel to and reinforcement of, the cultural exchanges of knowledge that had been the dominant emphasis of Santiniketan. With reference to the latter, Rabindranath claimed that knowledge attains greater degrees of completeness with growing awareness of the world and its interconnections, allowing humanity to realize its potentialities. The expansion of knowledge is paralleled by the growth of co-operatives that would provide the co-relative of knowledge-making.

Equally important is the profound effect of this mode of globality on the self and its social location. If willed self-division was the mode of cultural globality as I have argued elsewhere, then Sriniketan's globality demands a social extension of the self. Or, more appositely it allows for a certain kind of self-realisation. For Rabindranath, the self is individual with different capacities and it is this belief that pushes him to argue against mechanical equality. But equally, the self is embedded in the social world. The self is located in a dual site: both facets are constitutive of the self.[46] The individuation of the peasantry — which was a historical consequence of British governance and the migration of zamindars away from the villages and their own responsibilities towards their tenants — impairs the very constitution of the self, thereby weakening its autonomy. Working together would produce social trust in a life marked by mutual quarrels, which would then free the self to gain a sense of control over its life and its productivity. Empowerment through social bonding would also produce a sense of autonomy for the self.

The ethic of self-empowerment through social bonding has important economic and political ramifications. Self-organization allows labour to realize the value of its effort. In the context of co-operatives, Rabindranath comes close to formulating labour as the basis of value.

[46] In his short note on Welfare, Rabindranath says that the "growth of greatness for an individual can only become real by establishing wide relationship with a large number of other individuals", "Individuality", *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, *Vol. IV: A Miscellany*, Nitypriya Ghosh, ed., New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, f. pub. 2007, p. 275.

What this means is a change in the nature of accumulation itself. Accumulation is no longer individual but becomes a social activity. This allows Rabindranath to reformulate his understanding of greed. In the lectures on Nationalism, Rabindranath had seen greed as a constitutive part of competition and its dominant position in the world as the driving force of violence and possible self-destruction. In that context it was clear that greed needed to be kept within limits like competition. However, the collective realization of the value of labour allows Rabindranath to change his notion of greed. He now argues that greed is an unavoidable drive in mankind and it can be nourished through co-operatives. Co-operative greed would lead to an accumulation that would be social in character and hence would be governed by its needs.

The socialization of greed through co-operatives, would also possess an important political function. Rabindranath makes a distinction between formal political democracy and substantial economic democracy. The instance of democractic functioning in the USA indicates how it degenerates into a plutocracy, as it is the wealthy who dominate governance. Economic empowerment would allow co-operatives to produce a stable grassroots basis for democracy that would have the power to participate actively in governance. Co-operatives complete the practice of democracy.

Co-operatives provide the basis of self-formation in two senses. From what I have shown above, it completes the self, through a non-competitive globality, empowering it in economic and political ways. Secondly, it is a social formation consisting of networks of co-operation that is based on working with others and hence has to have a pragmatic orientation. What is significant here is that the very conception of co-operatives draws on ideas and experiences in global circulation.[47] Co-operatives draw on a rich tradition of international experience developed mainly among the internal others of the West, that is, the

[47] While Rabindranath acknowledged indigenously available forms of co-operation, he also stated that they were a part of a simple form of social life and hence had limited relevance.

working classes and peasantry in Europe.[48] This impacts on Rabindranath through two kinds of networks. The first is one that combines the literary with the activist. In *Samabayniti*, Rabindranath mentions that he began to take co-operatives seriously after reading the work of AE. The social name of the latter was George William Russell.[49] He was a part of the Irish Revival of the turn of the century together with W.B.Yeats but was also committed to rural development and influenced in this by Sir Horace Plankett who led the co-operative movement in rural Ireland. What is equally germane for us is that Rabindranath was in touch with AE through James Cousins, a Theosophist and co-member of the Irish Revival with several literary works to his credit (Rabindranath nominated him for the Nobel Prize) and who was also involved in rural activism in Madanpalle in the South.[50] The other parallel source of direct global influence was that of the colonial government, which passed a legislation in 1904 to establish standard rules for operating co-operatives.[51] The co-operatives

[48] I should add here that this cosmopolitan circulation through co-operatives remained an important element of functioning in Sriniketan. At its beginnings Gretchen Green came and set up a dispensary, which was then extended by Kalimohon Ghosh into the Health Co-operatives. Later, Kalimohon was given funds to study in rural reconstruction in S.E. Europe for five months, *Viswabharati Annual Report, 1931*. Gourgopal Ghosh who headed the Village Welfare Department studied co-operatives in Europe in 1926 and set up the Co-operative Bank in 1927. Kalimohon also visited other parts of India such as Hyderabad to draw schemes for village reconstruction, *Viswabharati Annual Report*, *1929*.

[49] I should add here that Rabindranath was intimately acquainted with co-operatives even before this, and he mentions this in *Samabayniti*. The Hindustan Co-operative Insurance Society was formed in 1909 at Jorasanko, his paternal residence in Calcutta, by Ambika Charan Ukil, a family friend and promoted by Surendranath Tagore, his nephew. "The Co-operative Principle", *English Writings: Vol. IV*, op. cit, p. 598. Of course he had established the Patisar Co-operative Bank in 1905.

[50] He was already discussing co-operatives with its Irish pioneer, Sir Horace Plankett in his London flat in 1912 with Pearson and Rathindranath. Rathindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, Calcutta: Viswabharati, 2003, f. pub. 1958 p. 117.

[51] Although this act was celebrated by many, it appeared to solve the problem of rural financing by providing "an alternative agency for the supply of capital on reasonable terms without involving too great a measure of state aid." B.B. Misra, *District Administration and Rural Development in India: Policy Objectives and Administrative Change in Historical Perspective*, Delhi: OUP, 1983, p. 123.

of Sriniketan worked under this law. Let me elaborate a little more on these two global nodes to which Sriniketan's co-operatives can be referenced.

Government promotion of co-operatives stemmed from the possibility of a low cost investment that would help to stabilize the position of small farmers and with it,[52] the small peasant economy, an imperative that was a concern in the Bengal Tenancy Amendment Bill of 1885. Specifically, it derived from the experience of the famines of late nineteenth century and the massive transfer of land to moneylenders. The conception itself was derived from Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffesisen, who pioneered rural credit societies in Germany, which later spread to other countries of Europe including Ireland, France and Denmark. The system was geared to small farmers and had a moral objective in that loans were regulated by social approval of the co-operative members who were drawn from a small community. Further, unlimited liability ensured that all members felt responsible for the repayment of the loan.[53] The colonial government followed these principles quite rigorously. The preface to the legislation on co-operatives states that its aim was to "encourage thrift, self-help and co-operation among agriculturists, artisans and persons of limited means"[54] and insists that the unit of co-operative should be a village and if not, units such as tribes and castes. This would ensure a principle of social regulation

[52] See Misra, B. B., *District Administration and Rural Development in India: Policy Objectives and Administrative Change in Historical Perspective*, Delhi: OUP, 1983, pp. 122–3.

[53] Raiffesisen intended banks to serve moral and financial ends by consolidating rural ties. Only members of an association could get loans and only for a productive purpose which the association could verify. It would cater to a small area with limit of 1,500 souls and would not step outside the district. This would allow members to know each other's characters and circumstances. This was necessary for financial safety since it was based on unlimited liability. Panchanandas Mukhopadhyaya, *The Co-operative Credit Movement in India, Indian Citizen Series No. (1),* Calcutta: Rai M.C. Sarcar Bahadur & Sons, 1914, pp. 4–5.

[54] Act no. X of 1904, "An act to provide for the constitution and control of Co-operative Credit Societies", *A Collection of The Acts passed by the Governor General of India in Council in the year 1912*, Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1913, NAI.

and trust through which both the object of loans and their repayment could be regulated. However, the element of social self-regulation itself was subject to the authority of the Registrar, who had final authority in all matters including certifying the tribe or caste.[55]

In contrast to the policy discourse of colonial writings, George Russell's *The National Being: Some Thoughts on Irish Polity* provided a more ambitious social theory and programme of co-operatives.[56] While following the working class utopian Robert Owen in posing co-operatives against the ethic of competition and economic individualism, Russell addressed its need in peasant economies. He argued that co-operatives were the only way to economically rescue the Irish peasant, who could not think beyond his family, from continued deprivation and migration. Russell's constituency was the small farmer and wage earner and he proposed that the co-operative movement should be an instrument for national renewal. This would be achieved by a many tiered organization that would have a central institution to co-ordinate its functions. Co-operatives would have an educative function since the peasants and their representatives to higher bodies, would learn about production and distribution and the conditions of competition at both the national and international levels. Co-operatives would also lead to economic empowerment and allow the use of machinery, the cost of which was prohibitive for individual farmers to use. This would permit the deepening of democracy that would break the hold of Capital in its rule over the State, parliament and newspapers. The ultimate ambition was to build a nation drawing on free citizens living in a state of harmony.

The proximity of these policies and theories to Rabindranath's ideas are quite obvious. It is clear that Rabindranath derives his object of

[55] See also Act No. II of 1912, "An Act to amend the Law relating to Co-operative Societies", *A Collection of the Acts passed by the Governor General of India in Council in the year 1912,* Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1913, National Archives Library.

[56] I have drawn on "A.E." George William Russell, *The National Being: Some Thoughts on Irish Polity, Project Gutenberg,_Release Date: July 29, 2009* [EBook #8104], accessed 1 November 2012.

address in the small peasant from the Raffiesesen model, but it is equally evident from the design of *Samabayniti* that he would have had greater sympathy with the ambitious theory of Russell, especially the alternative to economic individualism. However, there would have been differences on the subject of nation building—which Rabindranath avoids in his essays. But more interesting are the questions of the self. Russell's assumptions about the self is that co-operatives would provide an addition to individual selves. On the other hand, for Rabindranath, the self is constitutively doubled towards both the individual and to social bondings and hence co-operatives are really the actualization of the self. It is this realization that would provide access to self-trust. Equally important is the fact that it is this assumption of the self that provides the groundwork for setting into motion a process of re-adjusting the superordinate–subordinate relationship that Rabindranath does not foreclose. It is not clear from Rabindranath's theory what shape this relationship would resolve itself, if at all, a lack of clarity that derives from Rabindranath's larger commitment to the changeability of processes in general. In contrast, Russell lays down a well worked out plan and telos for co-operatives that would work like a well oiled machine right up to the level of the nation state, ensuring a thorough and substantive democracy within the nation. Instead Rabindranath allows for the more open route of exemplary action and does not lay out an organizational programme of democratic transformation. He simply provides the preconditions for a process of democratization, the shape of which he does not foreclose. And this would not necessarily be concentrated within the boundaries of the nation. To be specific, neither colonial policymakers (for obvious reasons) nor Russell (who assumes a politically formed citizen who simply needs economic empowerment) address the problematic question of relating to the poor and socially deprived in a non-hierarchical relationship.

III

An important document generated by the co-operative movement in Sriniketan was that of the report on the Ballabhpur Health Society authored by Kalimohon Ghosh,[57] the leading organizer and

[57] *Rural Survey Ballabhpur Sriniketan,* Kalimohon Ghosh, ed., Village Welfare Department, n.d. Rabindra Bhavan Archives.

propagandist for co-operatives, especially for Health Co-operatives which were the most successful among other similar enterprises.[58] This village was a depressed one. There was a clear co-relationship between caste and land ownership (with the high caste Brahmin Bhattacharyas owning the major part of the land). While there was mutual interaction between peasants during festivals, everyday life was marked by clearly demarcated hierarchies, with the poor being passive and even afraid to speak their minds out to the upper castes. This was a village in which soil fertility and population were declining, everyone, including the Brahmins, were indebted. Within this world, water and malaria-bearing mosquitoes were the most dangerous problems. It was in order to resolve this challenge that the Health Society was founded. Members of the society could avail of the services of a doctor (for one rupee) who treated diseases on half fees; they could also get medicines from the Viswabharati dispensary at nominal cost (an anna per bottle). One out of the four annas that was charged as admission fees represented the share in the association while three annas were used for improving health conditions. Besides this, the Society engaged in other activities as well. It excavated *doba*s [ponds], cleared jungles, laid out drains and engaged in campaigns to prevent diseases and carry on propaganda work for "rousing sense of responsibility" about maternity care, public sanitation and so on. All these were a part of removing the conditions that encouraged malaria, a disease that affected almost every labourer in the early years.[59]

This case study of Ballabhpur indicates the pedagogic principle implemented at its most comprehensive. Pedagogy took on conventional forms of instructions but more importantly was co-terminous with the process of reconstructing the organizational core of rural life and the activities in which it engaged. Pedagogy was then a project of re-forming an already formed self. But the hierarchical relationship that lay at its core could not also be denied. A quick look at the organizational principles of the Ballabhpur Health Co-operative reveals

[58] Elmhirst recalls that "it was through medicine and treatment that we found the readiest path to the hearts, affections and so to the confidence of the villagers.", *Pioneer in…*, op. cit, p. 15.
[59] *Rural Survey Ballabhpur Sriniketan,* Kalimohon Ghosh, ed., Village Welfare Department (date missing, possibly 1926), Rabindra Bhavan.

an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the liability of the members was limited to subscriptions due. Subscriptions could be paid in labour or in kind. This allowed it to be open to poor peasants. Equally important was the fact that the supreme authority was vested in the General Meeting, where one fifth of the members constituted a quorum. On the other hand, the problem of operating within a hierarchical society was evident in the fact that members did not need to be literate to subscribe to the laws: they could do so by affixing either their signature or their thumb print. However, the documents creating charge or obligation on part of the society could not be thumb-printed and had to be signed by officials.[60] Clearly the leadership had to be from among the literate who could take responsibility for crucial decisions. The symmetry that inspired co-operatives had to be based on a basic social asymmetry.

The socially structured asymmetry could be seen as something that could only recuperate and repeat hierarchies in a new mode. However if, as I have implied above, pedagogy was a means of imparting the techniques of self re-formation in which the self would be able to articulate its needs, place its demands on social hierarchies while entering into bondings with others through the shared work—across the social hierarchies that divided activists from peasants—then we may be able to understand this apparent contradiction as a dynamic paradox. By this, I mean a situation that may remain hierarchical but is one that is constantly, dynamically re-negotiating the conditions of hierarchy itself. It is in terms of this larger condition that would admit of the possibility of such dynamic interactions, that I would like to understand the pedagogic practices of Sriniketan. Specifically, instead of concentrating on the actual workings of institutions and the power distribution within these, I will focus on certain spheres of rural life through which these larger conditions of dynamism were introduced. These concern three areas: of surveys, of labour and of joy.

Surveys were identified as a critical precondition for reconstructive work, something that Elmhirst had introduced from his own training in

[60] Appendix: "Model Bye Laws for Health Co-operatives", *Rural Survey Ballabhpur Sriniketan,* Kalimohon Ghosh, ed., Village Welfare Department (date missing, possibly 1926), Rabindra Bhavan.

Cornell. Its importance for Rabindranath can be grasped by the fact that he forbade Elmhirst to learn Bangla so that the Indians would be able to learn how to ask questions by the process of translating Elmhirst. What interests me here is not the effectiveness of these surveys, but the social interactions between activists and villagers that these index. Activists who were engaged in either getting villagers involved in some joint activity or in the more difficult enterprise of survey and enumeration, faced suspicion and hostility of the villagers. Elmhirst recalled villagers initially saw them as either tax collectors or as simple fools.[61] Hashem Ali who joined Sriniketan in the 1930's after training in the USA, was also faced with hostility and suspicion. However after a week of intense effort, he gained the trust of the villagers to the extent that they gave ready answers and he began to keep a diary where he wrote out the personal experiences that he encountered in relating to the villagers.[62]

However, internal hierarchies within village life were a more insuperable problem. Hemanta Sarkar's recollections tell us how he was introduced to survey work by Kalimohon Ghosh. The latter had a knack of sitting in *adda*s with the villagers and being accepted as one of their own.[63] However there is a twist to this story. Hemanta

[61] Deccan villagers thought Elmhirst when he was working there in 1918, as either a tax collector or a missionary come to break their homes; or a fool. "The foundation of Sriniketan", *Rabindranath…*, op.cit, p.11. Although these were deduced from the Deccan peasants, by implication Elmhirst also applies these to villagers in Sriniketan.

[62] Ali, H., Dr., "The economic survey of Goalpara", *Viswabharati News,* Vol. II, No. 9, March 1934. I should add that Ali's survey which was on 87 families, was despairing of whether any real work could be done given the structural nature of inequality.

[63] Ghosh, Kalimohon, a Swadeshi activist, was a legendary figure who was inspired to join Rabindranath after the latter's Pabna Address. He worked with Rabindranath on his programme of rural reconstruction and in his zamindari before coming to Sriniketan. He pioneered the Health Co-operatives and was respected for listening to the peasants, treating them as equals while patiently arguing with them. "Kalimohon Ghosh", *Viswabharati News,* Vol IX, No.1, July 1940. According to Satyadas Chakrabarty, volunteers of the early period lead lifestyles that were not very different from those of the villagers, dressing simply and moving about in cycles or by walking, *Sriniketaner Gorar Katha,* Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 2001, p. 7.

quickly realized that the zamindar who was an oppressive one, was nevertheless the centre of the village adda. He joined this adda, no doubt because he needed to get acceptability and also possibly because they were the only people with whom he could socialize with some ease. This did not prevent him from forming friendships with others, especially with young people whom he managed to persuade to be taught after he had got them interested in stories that he told them. Yet, the people he remembered as individuals were those who attended the adda at the zamindar.[64] Clearly this was the unavoidable filter through which he was able to relate to the rest of the village.

At the same time activists managed to tap into certain resources that could momentarily counteract this hierarchy. We have the testimony of Harry Timbres, a missionary, a specialist in malaria, who remarkably went to the Soviet Union at the end of his life and died working among the peasantry there.[65] He relates how he organized a discussion in a village. He was confronted by a seating arrangement in which the zamindars occupied the higher seats. And it was they who initiated the discussion. However, as the discussion gathered steam, the hierarchies began to disappear and different sections of the group began to contribute equally to the discussion.[66]

The practices of surveys indicate not just a simple reproduction or even recasting of hierarchies, but a new thing.[67] This may be regarded as a space that is opened up by the mutual counteractions of embedded hierarchy with the commitment to non-hierarchical relationship. The pedagogical orientation to social activism takes here the modality of negotiation and unresolvability that constitutes an important contribution. An "objective" token of the possibilities it opened out can be deduced from the impressive spread of co-operatives. In 1927 the Viswabharati

[64] Sarkar, Hemanta, "Sriniketaney amar gram seba: Ballabhpur", *Udichi* 04 paus, 1386 [1979].
[65] The Society of the Friends of America supported Harry Timbres and Rebecca in their visit in 1931. Viswabharati Annual Report, 1932.
[66] "The Meeting", *Viswabharati News*, Vol. I, No.5, 1932.
[67] From a functional view-point too, it was a new thing since Elmhirst introduced it because of his training in Cornell. *Pioneer in...,* op.cit, p.15.

Central Co-operative Bank was started. The Annual Report for 1928 says that 351 village co-operatives worked under it. Four new rural co-operative banks were started in villages, while a big Dharmagola (a co-operative granary) at Sriniketan was established catering to three villages with 51 members. The Central Co-operative Bank serviced an area of 400 square miles, looking after 200 co-operative societies for agricultural credit, irrigation, granaries and so on, covering a population of nearly two lakhs.

No doubt this expansion took place because of organized financial intervention by the Sriniketan establishment, but its equally clear that without the participation of villagers this expansion would have been impossible. In this context, it may be mentioned that sometimes the force of example worked autonomously. In 1928, the Sriniketan establishment was approached by Goalpara village to start Health society after seeing success at Ballabhpur. Above all, success was measured in terms of both economic viability and self-sufficiency. Thus we are told that the Bahiri society was most successful with 157 members and organisational self-sufficiency. On the other hand, Langhulia Society was least successful since it had to depend on funds from the Maharaja of Burdwan. It lacked the "spirit of self-reliance" essential to success of "co-operative organization".

The mode of negotiation was supplemented by another important area of activity, that is, of labour. This may not have been an integral part of co-operatives, but they contributed to its larger culture. Without trying to specify too closely the practices of labour in Sriniketan, what I would like to focus on is the mode of self-division that it sought to produce—something that ties it to Rabindranath's own notion of the process of exchange which constitutes global interaction. This imperative came out in the early pioneering days at the Surul farm by Elmhirst and his famous band of ten students from Santiniketan who had been assigned to him precisely because they were among the less academically minded in Santiniketan. The objective was to transform both *bhadralok* and peasant subjectivity through exemplary action. The initial ambition was to show bhadralok youth that agriculture could be a source of employment. But it also involved a deep dislike for the

upper caste bias against labour which Elmhirst had.[68] Students were made to engage in voluntary and back-breaking labour in cleaning dobas, engaging in detailed anti-malarial work, constructing roads and so on. They were given small plots of land which they had to cultivate to support themselves.

Elmhirst also confronted them with forms of labour that militated against caste prejudices such as cleaning toilets which they initially refused to do. This led to many months of wrangling between Elmhirst and the students.[69] Significantly Rabindranath intervened in Elmhirst's favour , stating that he found it some akin to prudery to possess a distaste for "Mother Dust"[70] — and he backed this up by personally starting the practice of cleaning his own latrine. While these acts represented an important intervention in re-forming bhadralok subjectivity, they also indicated an attempt to impress the villagers with their work in which they did not obey social distinctions with them. This extended to the activists. Kalimohon Ghosh, for instance, cycled long distances to villagers to engage in addas and through these, lay the basis for village reconstruction.

All this was designed to show peasants that transformation was do-able and in so doing, to transform peasant subjectivity so that it would become an active agent in rescuing the peasants from debt bondage and the bare life of depressed agricultural productivity. The most vivid story of this is given by Elmhirst's memoirs. What succeeded was exemplary and practical intervention through work. Initially, the activists were faced with hostility and they could get little opportunity

[68] I should add that the activists from abroad in Viswabharati shared the criticism of bhadralok students who had it too easy, being looked after by servants. This was an observation made by Mme Levy, wife of the first Visiting Professor to Viswabharati to which Elmhirst concurred—and acted upon! See "Sriniketan Diary", *Poet and Plowman*, Kolkata; Viswabharati, 2008. f. pub 1975, p. 69.
[69] See the references to this in "Sriniketan Diary", *Poet and Plowman*, Kolkata: Viswabharati, 2008. f. pub 1975, pp. 100–9.
[70] In his letter to Elmhirst, Rabindranath wrote, "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." L.K. Elmhirst, "The foundation of Sriniketan", *Pioneer*, op. cit, p. 10.

to demonstrate the need for activism by villagers themselves. For Elmhirst this opportunity came because of a fire that destroyed half the roofs of a village. The band of activists came two days later but demonstrated to the village elders how they could put out a fire within five minutes. Following this, the elders—who had earlier suspected that getting them to learn a fire drill was a preparation for recruiting them for the war in Mesopotamia—now offered to learn the drill themselves; later they allowed them free access to train boys and even the girls.[71] Elmhirst's narrative introduces us to the ways in which a culture of co-operation was laid out among the activist and villagers and with it, a sense of mutual trust.

There was more recognizable pedagogic principle also at work. The pedagogy of Siksha-Satra, the experiment in semi-residential rural education carried out in Sriniketan, emphasized the importance of engaging in manual and other activities to learn about the world. The boys of the Siksha-Satra, according to Rabindranath, did not distinguish between holiday time and the time of learning since a holiday spirit took shape in the activities they engaged in the kitchen, their vegetable garden, their weaving, and the small repairs they undertook.[72] Even if we disregard this statement as an accurate reflection of their working condition, it nevertheless indicates that objectives of education itself is a form of active life. It was a pedagogy that tried to recast work as a form of playful co-activity. This brings us to a consideration of joy.

I will call the attempt to braid everyday life with joy as a mode of transformed experience.[73] In general this was a part of a larger project of Viswabharati, but it has its distinct salience in the attempt to introduce joy in both the life of the village as well as in the experience of work

[71] Op. cit, p. 12.
[72] Tagore, Rabindranath, "A Poet's School", *Pioneer in …,* op. cit, p. 34.
[73] Elmhirst notes that Rabindranath was constantly urging them to draw upon all the resources, in music, song, drama and dance, drawing and design, at Santiniketan in order to enrich our lives … "until we and the cultivators could produce a richness and a wealth of cultural life of our own". *Pioneer in…,* op. cit, p. 22.

itself. There was for instance melas, folk fairs that Rabindranath had recommended in his lecture on Swadeshi Samaj. A description of Benuri Mela tells us that it was held over three days. On the first day, demonstrations were given on topics such as rice strains, handicrafts and hygene. The second day featured a Baby Show in which advice was given on maternity care, a session attended by many Muslim women. Till late evening there was poetry recitation with a film show watched by about 3,000 persons with 1,000 of them being women.[74]

The programme of Benuri Mela illuminates two imperatives. The first was to revive the cultural life of the villages by reintroducing folk forms such as *jatra*s and *kathakata* while making these inhabit the sphere of more narrow acts of instruction concerning agricultural techniques, maternity care and so on. The two imperatives were brought together in the use of cinema—a new novel medium of spectacles to communicate such campaigns. The second imperative was one that stemmed from a point that Dixit Sinha makes very perceptively. He argues that Rabindranath believed that individual labour was monotonous and became a way of killing the creative and intellectual capacities of the peasant. On the other hand, work done collectively produced joy. This perception allows us to understand the attempts to make the very act of manual work, joyful. Hence Rabindranath suggested various ceremonies and festivities associated with labour such as the *Hal Chalan* festival which he himself inaugurated at the start of the season of cultivation. The proceedings were elaborate: the ground to be ploughed was drawn over with alpana designs, a team of one black and four white bulls were brought with a decorated plough. Songs were sung, Rabindranath delivered a short address and then put his hand to the plough accompanied by the chanting of Vedic mantras. This was a part of a seasonal calendar of festivals which inserted Vedic mantras within an overall aesthetic ritual.[75]

[74] "The Benuri Mela", *Viswabharati News*, Vol. I, No.11, May '33.
[75] Viswabharati Annual Report, 1929; this report also gives a description of the other festivals that were held.

In conclusion it may be appropriate to note the obvious: neither Sriniketan nor its co-operatives were successful.[76] I will not dwell here on its failures. Instead, it may be more rewarding to look at the problems that beset it in its period of relative success. For this not only indicates a different modality in which globality works and hence, by implication, reveals the rich diversity of the history of globality that still awaits to be written. For our purposes however, Sriniketan's globality is important for it forefronts the impediments and stubborn structures of embedded, hierarchical traditions with which globality has to transact. In this it extends the pedagogical model that was used for Santiniketan to address the question of hierarchy while reconstructing the collective self of rural Bengal. This may not resolve the problem of hierarchy. But it produces, through a rich and varied culture of work and cultural practices, an ethical commitment to a process that could convert the rigidity of social structures into a flexible, varied and constantly productive area of negotiations and self-divisions that keep alive the promise of a future.

[76] In a letter to Kalimohon Ghosh, Rabindranath's exasperation at a sense of failure comes through in his allegation that the activists, including Kalimohon, did not possess the strength of conviction that could have led to success of co-operatives. While the accusation may have been unfair, given the general acknowledgement of Kalimohon's success, the reason may have something to do with the fact that the League of Nations, obviously under the impression that their co-operatives experiment was an unqualified success, had asked Rabindranath's opinion on the subject. 04. 09.30 from Berlin. *Bangla Chithipatra File* (1-886), *Rabindra Bhaban Viswa Bharati* 014, Vol. A, File Folder 161, "Correspondence of Kalimohon Ghosh".