

Global Tourism in Shantiniketan: Cultural Exchange, Literary Legacy, and the Tagorean Vision

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ABSTRACT

Shantiniketan, founded by Rabindranath Tagore, has evolved from a quiet ashram-school into a global cultural destination. This article examines the rise of global tourism in Shantiniketan, analyzing how Tagore's educational ideals, his cosmopolitan philosophy, and Visva-Bharati's multicultural space shaped its global appeal. It merges perspectives from cultural studies, tourism studies, and English literature to understand how Tagore's literary imagination continues to frame Shantiniketan's identity as a site of cultural pilgrimage.

1. Introduction

Global tourism has expanded significantly in the twenty-first century, transforming historically and culturally significant spaces into global destinations. Shantiniketan, located in Birbhum, West Bengal, stands out as a unique tourist centre shaped by the humanistic philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore. While many tourist locations depend on landscapes or monuments, Shantiniketan's appeal is rooted in its literary heritage, educational experimentation, artistic environment, and living cultural traditions. Tourism in this region is deeply influenced by Tagore's cosmopolitan worldview, which emphasized cross-cultural exchange and the unity of humanity (Tagore Sadhana 42).

2. Tagore's Vision and the Foundation of Shantiniketan

Tagore founded the ashram-school at Shantiniketan in 1901 as a protest against colonial models of education. He envisioned a learning environment rooted in nature, creativity, and global inclusiveness. According to Tagore, education should be "a meeting place of cultures" (Tagore Towards Universal Man 18). This philosophy later shaped Visva-Bharati University, inaugurated in 1921, with the motto *Yatra visvam bhavatyekanidam*—"where the world makes a home in a single nest."

The cosmopolitan spirit embedded in this motto is central to Shantiniketan's tourism. Visitors come not merely to see a university, but to witness the material realization of Tagore's literary and philosophical ideals. Scholars argue that global tourists perceive Shantiniketan as a "cultural text" that can be read through Tagore's writings (Sen 94).

3. Shantiniketan as a Global Cultural Destination

The gradual rise of tourism in Shantiniketan reflects global interest in Tagore's universal humanism, art, and education. Tourists—both domestic and international—visit for:

- a. Tagore's ashram compounds
- b. The Visva-Bharati campus
- c. Kala-Bhavana and its global modernist art tradition.
- d. Festivals like Poush Mela and Basanta Utsav.
- e. Baul music and indigenous craft markets

The multicultural atmosphere aligns with Tagore's belief that art and cultural expression transcend borders (Tagore *The Religion of Man* 67). As a result, Shantiniketan has become not simply a heritage site but a crossroads of global artistic and literary traditions.

4. Literary Tourism and the Tagorean Landscape

From an English literature perspective, Shantiniketan represents a lived space of Tagore's literary imagination. His poems and prose often evoke the natural landscapes of Birbhum—the khoai terrain, sal forests, and red earth—all of which remain central tourist attractions today. Many scholars suggest that visitors read Shantiniketan as an extension of Tagore's poetry, making the place itself a literary artifact (Chaudhuri 134).

Tagore's concept of "world literature", expressed through his Nobel Prize-winning literary contributions, further globalized Shantiniketan. International tourists often describe their visit as a "pilgrimage" to understand the world of the poet who stood as a bridge between East and West (Dutta and Robinson 212).

5. Festivals and Living Cultural Heritage

Shantiniketan's festivals play a major role in sustaining global tourism. The Poush Mela, first organised in 1894, celebrates folk culture, crafts, and Tagorean music. The Basanta Utsav, inspired by Tagore's celebration of spring, attracts thousands of visitors from around the world.

These festivals reflect Tagore’s belief in cultural exchange through community celebration (Tagore Creative Unity 53). The democratic, inclusive nature of these events reinforces Shantiniketan’s global identity.

6. Art, Architecture, and Intercultural Aesthetics

Kala-Bhavana, the art school founded by Tagore and developed by Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee, and Ramkinkar Baij, is a major draw for global art tourism. The open-air studios, murals, and sculptures demonstrate Tagore’s fusion of Oriental and Occidental aesthetics (Mukherjee 148). This synthesis is visible in architectural styles influenced by Japanese minimalism, Bengali hut designs, and modernist principles.

Tourists engage with Shantiniketan as a visual text, interpreting how global modernism and indigenous traditions interact in its environment.

7. Economic and Sociocultural Impact of Tourism

Tourism significantly contributes to the local economy by supporting artisans, Baul musicians, craft sellers, homestay owners, and university-linked activities. Tagore believed that rural development must accompany cultural enrichment (Tagore Nationalism 29). The rise of tourism maintains this legacy by empowering local communities.

However, critics note that commercialization sometimes distorts Tagore’s ideals, as excessive commercialization risks transforming cultural authenticity into “marketable heritage” (Sen 101). Despite these concerns, Shantiniketan largely preserves its artistic and educational integrity, continuing to attract global audiences.



8. Conclusion

Shantiniketan's growth as a global tourism centre is inseparable from Rabindranath Tagore's universal vision. It stands as a unique destination where literature, education, art, and culture converge. The landscape of Shantiniketan remains a living embodiment of Tagore's literary imagination and humanistic ideals. For scholars of English literature, the site offers a rare opportunity to study how a writer's vision can shape an entire cultural geography. In the age of globalization, Shantiniketan continues to function as a "world nest"—a space where diverse people come together through art, learning, and shared humanity.

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