

# Santiniketan plaque row: Visva-Bharati VC accused of trying to please bosses in Delhi for extension of tenure

*Snehamoy Chakraborty*

The installation of two marble plaques inscribed with the names of Visva-Bharati chancellor Narendra Modi and vice-chancellor Bidyut Chakrabarty mentioning Unesco's world heritage site tag for Santiniketan has sparked off a controversy as Rabindranath Tagore doesn't find mention on the tablets.

On September 17, Santiniketan in Birbhum district was added to Unesco's World Heritage List.

“Established in rural West Bengal in 1901 by the renowned poet and philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore, Santiniketan was a residential school and centre for art based on ancient Indian traditions and on a vision of the unity of humanity transcending religious and cultural boundaries,” the Unesco website read.

The Nobel laureate had set up the Visva-Bharati university in Santiniketan in 1921.

To announce Unesco's honour, Visva-Bharati authorities recently put up at least two concrete plaques — one in front of Upasana Griha (the glass prayer hall) and the other at Rabindra Bhavana complex that houses five of Tagore's residences and a museum. The two plaques have “UNESCO INSCRIBED WORLD HERITAGE SITE” written on them and mention the names of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as Visva-Bharati chancellor and Bidyut Chakrabarty as vice-chancellor.

Trinamul Rajya Sabha member and former Union culture secretary Jawhar Sircar Sircar, who had actively been associated with the process of application to Unesco seeking heritage site tag for Santiniketan, said Visva-Bharati couldn't take credit for the honour as it was specifically for Tagore.

“I had visited 40 to 50 Unesco world heritage sites across the globe during my tenure as culture secretary. At those sites, there is no such instance of what Visva-Bharati did. The Unesco inscribed Santiniketan, not Visva-Bharati, as a heritage site fostered by the ideology of Rabindranath Tagore. It is nothing but an instance of poor class and poor taste,” Sircar told **The Telegraph**.

He said there were plaques in front of other such sites but they had details of the place, history, and the reason for the recognition. Those plaques, he added, did not name “mayors or ministers”.

Sircar said the Visva-Bharati authorities had installed the plaques from a political urge of appropriation.

“UNESCO specifically said they are honouring Rabindranath Tagore and his unique legacy by

declaring Santiniketan as a World Heritage Site. A megalomaniac VC and his boss seem to think Unesco is honouring them!!” Sircar wrote on his X handle.

The plaques, varsity sources said, were set up at the instruction of Chakrabarty.

A varsity official said the move by the VC was nothing but a ploy to please Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP to get a year’s extension after his tenure ends on November 8.

At least one dozen communications were sent to the powers that be in Delhi with requests not to extend the tenure of Chakrabarty.

While passing an order related to the removal of a Visva-Bharati physics professor from the prestigious CERN project, Justice Abhijit Gangopadhyay of Calcutta High Court had recently remarked that the VC should be removed

“The VC is desperately trying to woo BJP leaders in Delhi to get an extension and that is why he planted such plaques which are of poor taste. He intentionally dragged the Prime Minister into the controversy with an ulterior motive of self-benefit,” said a varsity official.

An official in the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) said such plaques should have been erected complying with norms as no one could put up any obstruction in front of any monument without the culture ministry’s consent.

“It is not that any landlord or official can set up anything whimsically in front of any monument that is declared as a Unesco World Heritage Site. We have to check whether the things were placed in the right place,” an ASI official said on the condition of anonymity.

Old timers in Santiniketan said Tagore was against any such personal campaign and that was why there was no bust or statue of the bard on the campus.

“It was clear from the plaques that the VC installed those to earn credit for him and his boss in Delhi. This goes against the culture of Santiniketan. It is unfortunate that the administration even forgot to mention the name of Rabindranath Tagore,” said Sudripta Tagore, a member of the Tagore family who lives in Santiniketan.

Opposition parties latched on to the issue and accused the saffron ecosystem of trying to erase Tagore’s name and replace it with Modi.

“Erasure of Nehru wasn’t enough. Now, erasure of Rabindranath Tagore also begins,” Congress communications chief Jayram Ramesh wrote on his X social media handle.

Even BJP leaders are not happy with the plaques.

“I will write to the Prime Minister’s Office to know whether the VC took permission before using the name of Narendra Modiji. In case there was no permission taken, I will write to our Prime Minister seeking his intervention,” said Anupam Hazra, a BJP national secretary.

Visva-Bharati officials, however, claimed the plaques were temporary and would be replaced by

those provided by the ASI and Unesco.

“These plaques are temporary to demarcate the area only. We will replace those with plaques that the ASI will send to us. Unesco will also send a plaque for display,” said Mahua Banerjee, acting public relations officer of Visva-Bharati.

However, a senior varsity official rejected the varsity’s claim and asked why temporary plaques were installed on a concrete base.

“We think the administration has realised that it did not do the right thing. Now, they are trying to undo the damage by claiming that the plaques were temporary,” a varsity official said.

Banerjee, however, said: “ I don’t know why those were made of concrete. I think the plaques will be replaced with new ones.”