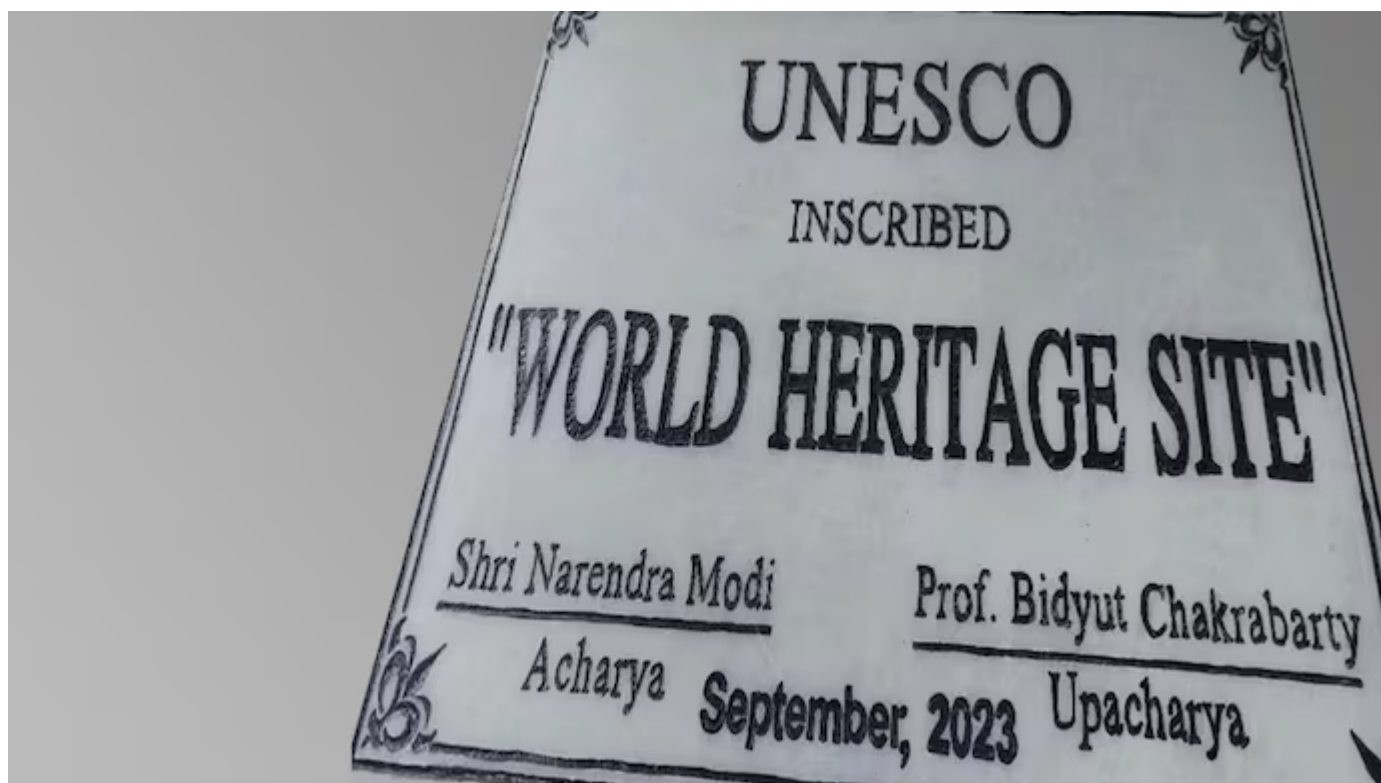


Why two marble plaques have stirred controversy in West Bengal

Arkamoy Datta Majumdar Kolkata, UPDATED: Oct 25, 2023 19:36 IST

Two official plaques commemorating the inclusion of Santiniketan as a UNESCO World Heritage site bear PM Narendra Modi's name—but not Rabindranath Tagore's



One of the plaques commemorating Santiniketan's status as a World Heritage site



Perhaps nothing exemplifies the nature of the BJP's disconnect with the civilisational and cultural ethos of West Bengal like the number of faux pas the party has landed itself in in the last few years over Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, the state's greatest icon. Two white plaques that have come up on the Visva-Bharati University campus are the latest cause for embarrassment.

Two marble plaques—one in front of the glass prayer hall, or the Upasana Griha, and the other at the Rabindra Bhavan complex—were installed by the university authorities recently to announce the inscription of Santiniketan as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Both plaques have the names of

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as the chancellor of the university, and Bidyut Chakrabarty as the vice-chancellor. But Tagore finds no mention in either of two installations. While the absence of Tagore's name may not be a direct handiwork of the BJP, opposition parties did not waste any time in training their guns on Modi and the entire saffron ecosystem.

On September 17, Santiniketan was inducted into UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites. According to UNESCO's website, "Santiniketan is an embodiment of Rabindranath Tagore's vision and philosophy of where 'the world would form a single nest' using a combination of education, appreciation of nature, music and the arts. It represents the distillation of Rabindranath Tagore's greatest works and the continuing legacy of his model of education that reinterpreted ancient Vedic traditions with open air classrooms arranged under the canopies of trees."

While Santiniketan was established in Bengal's Birbhum district in 1901, the poet established the Visva-Bharati in 1921.

The dropping of Tagore's name from the plaques, which have the words "UNESCO INSCRIBED WORLD HERITAGE SITE" audaciously engraved on them, has drawn sharp criticism. Trinamool Congress's Rajya Sabha member Jawhar Sircar, who was actively involved in the process of application for the World Heritage tag for Santiniketan during his tenure as the union culture secretary said in a tweet: "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!!"

Speaking to INDIA TODAY, Sircar claimed that the plaques are "an extension of the anti-Bengali sentiments that Modi nurtures". The MP alleged that to give Tagore's mention a miss was a deliberate attempt and that the step is in line with the cessation of funds under multiple social welfare schemes that "the union government has subjected Bengal to". "Modi is vindictive. He will not forgive Bengal for handing him over a defeat in 2021. Also he is anti-Bengali in general. Even the coterie he enjoys in Delhi has nobody from Bengal," Sircar said.

In the run up to the 2021 assembly polls, when the BJP was desperately trying to appropriate icons from Bengal, its key leaders had been involved in multiple embarrassing controversies over Tagore, such as the party's social media team attributing a quote to the party president J.P. Nadda where he apparently said that Tagore was born in Visva-Bharati, while spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia trying to school a TMC spokesperson on national television that Rabindranath's surname was Tagore and not Thakur (the Tagore family, to be clear, has always used two surnames—Tagore in English, and Thakur in Bengali). The Bengal BJP did not observe Tagore's death anniversary in its state office after losing the battle for Bengal, though a year ago, the same event was observed with much fanfare in the run up to the polls.

Sudripta Tagore, a Tagore family descendant and resident of Santiniketan, says the absence of Tagore's name from the plaque is 'unfortunate', and 'against the culture of Santiniketan'. He also alleged that the plaques proved that the V-C was trying to earn credit for himself and his boss.

The Congress has also come down heavily on the University administration on this issue. “Erasure of Nehru wasn’t enough. Now, erasure of Rabindranath Tagore also begins,” Congress communications chief Jairam Ramesh said on X.

As the controversy deepened, the university claimed that the plaques were temporary. “These are temporary plaques installed to demarcate the World Heritage Site area. We are in touch with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and once the plaques from their side arrive, we will put them up,” said Mahua Banerjee, the acting public relations officer of the university. However, she did not clarify whether the current plaques will be replaced. “Hopefully,” she said. “We will act as instructed by the ASI.”

[Subscribe to India Today Magazine](#)

Edited By:

Aditya Mohan Wig

Published On:

Oct 25, 2023