

Exclusion of Tagore's name from UNESCO plaques in Santiniketan: Self-promotion or saffron agenda?

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SPOTLIGHT

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The plaques were erected by Visva Bharati University authorities to commemorate the recent inclusion of Santiniketan as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

The Visva-Bharati vice chancellor says that the plaques are temporary, but critics allege political motives.

The exclusion of Rabindranath Tagore's name from "temporary" plaques erected by Visva Bharati University authorities to commemorate the recent inclusion of Santiniketan as a 'World Heritage Site' by UNESCO has generated widespread public outrage and ignited a political storm in West Bengal. While the marble slabs mention Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the vice chancellor of the university, Bidyut Chakrabarty, the name of the very man who founded the university township, the poet Tagore, was conspicuously absent. Incidentally, UNESCO itself acknowledged on its website that "Santiniketan was founded by Rabindranath Tagore, a renowned poet and philosopher." In September this year, Santiniketan became India's 41st UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In the face of criticism from all quarters, Visva-Bharati authorities contended that the expensive marble slabs were only temporary installations set up to "mark the heritage site" and would be removed once the Archaeological Survey of India and UNESCO provide the university with the "text." Sudipta Bhattacharyya, president of the Visva-Bharati University Faculty Association, pointed out that the "unauthorised" plaques had been placed on land outside the jurisdiction of the University. He stated, "The Visva-Bharati administration has acknowledged that these plaques, lacking Rabindranath's name, do not adhere to UNESCO's guidelines and will be replaced soon. However, in an attempt to extend his tenure, the vice chancellor has unlawfully installed several such plaques, using Acharya's name while shamelessly promoting his own. These unauthorised plaques have been placed on Santiniketan Trust's land and the PWD road without their consent."

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Bhattacharyya emphasised that it was Santiniketan that was awarded the title of a 'World Heritage Site', not Visva-Bharati. "The vice chancellor is wrongfully preventing tourists from accessing these sites. He has even deployed security guards to protect these illegal plaques from public outrage. We strongly object to this," he said. The Visva-Bharati University Faculty Association has already sent

emails to the Prime Minister and the Union Minister of Education, Dharmendra Pradhan, seeking their intervention in the matter. Furthermore, a senior government official, refuting the university's claim that it was awaiting UNESCO's guidance, stated, "UNESCO will communicate with the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Why should it give directions to Visva-Bharati?"

Political backlash

Although the plaques were installed on October 18, the subsequent Durga Puja festivities in West Bengal had kept the matter out of the public eye. With the conclusion of the Pujas on October 25, the issue immediately gained attention, sparking a strong political reaction. Trinamool Congress's Rajya Sabha MP Jawhar Sircar posted on social media: "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!!" Trinamool supremo and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, at a press conference on October 26, emphasised that it was because of Rabindranath Tagore that Santiniketan received its UNESCO status. "He is the creator of Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati, and they removed his name! We were silent because of the Durga Puja. If by tomorrow morning Rabindranath Tagore's name is not mentioned on the plaques, then from 10 am, my people there will start an agitation carrying pictures of Rabindranath Tagore," she declared.

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh remarked, "Erasure of Nehru wasn't enough. Now, erasure of Rabindranath Tagore also begins." Former seven-time Lok Sabha MP from Birbhum, Ramchandra Dome of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), said that the installation of the plaque was a "targeted design by the forces of Hindutva." Speaking to *Frontline*, he stated, "The present VC has been doing everything possible to do away with the ideals of Rabindranath Tagore and replace them with the ideology of his political superiors." He added that UNESCO's granting Santiniketan the status of a World Heritage Site is a historical event and the preparation for this was ongoing for a long time. "Just because the process has matured now, it does not mean that the credit goes to one person. People across the country are already expressing outrage over the issue."

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The situation has put the saffron party on the backfoot. A BJP source, while asserting that the plaques were "temporary" and that Trinamool and Congress were "indulging in political opportunism" with their protests, nevertheless conceded that it might be "misinterpreted to hurt the Bengali sentiment".

In addition to the Visva-Bharati Faculty Association, the Shantiniketan Trust (founded in 1888 by Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore's father), and Santiniketan Asramik Sangha (an organisation founded by Rabindranath Tagore in 1911) also voiced their opposition to the installation of the marble plaques.

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In a letter jointly addressed to the Prime Minister, dated October 26, the Shantiniketan Trust and the Asramik Sangha wrote: “Did Visva-Bharati take the consent of the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi before fixing his name along with the Vice-Chancellor's own name? It appears as self-advertisement which is not only damaging the image of the vice chancellor but also that of the respected chancellor Shri Narendra Modi. Neither the chancellor nor the vice chancellor is the founder of the heritage site and the constructions there, nor did they inaugurate the site. Why then should their names be inscribed below the declaration? Did UNESCO form any authorised body or committee which decide and control the management of these heritage areas? Have they been informed about the written scripts on the tablets? Did they give their consent despite knowing that it goes against the tradition of Santiniketan?”

Since Chakrabarty took over as the vice chancellor of Visva-Bharati in 2019, the central university has been embroiled in controversy. Chakrabarty has not only been engaged in a bitter and protracted feud with a section of the faculty but has also been attempting to reclaim a part of the land on which Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's ancestral house stands. Sen had alleged that the university authorities were doing so “to please their bosses in Delhi.” Amid the turmoil and unrest in the university, on October 18, the Calcutta High Court, presiding over a case related to Visva-Bharati, stated that Chakrabarty “must be removed from his post immediately.”