



A Sad Visit of Tagore's Dreamland, Shantiniketon

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It was the time of liberation of Bangladesh, October, 1971. I passed by the Bolpore railway station as a refugee to India from Joi Bangla (the then East Pakistan). The term Joi Bangla was very popular at that time. Spirit of liberation was glued to this term.

That journey started at New Shiliguri Station without a valid railway ticket. The generous Indian government and its citizens helped the Jai Bangla people with open heart at that time. Ten million refugees accumulated in Indian states around Bangladesh. I, as a refugee, moved from one place to the other free of cost. I wonder, did we properly appreciate the Indian help then and now?

I had occasion to see one railway ticket checker reacting to a Joi Bangla sitting next to me. The Joi Bangla was traveling without a ticket so was I. Obviously it was not possible to know who was a Joi Bangla and who was not. The checker asked for his ticket as to other Indian passengers. His answer was very short, "Joi Bangla." The answer sounded like: don't you know I got a special passport as a fortunate guy for being a Joi Bangla? The ticket checker did not like this attitude. He retorted, "Joi Bangla is not the answer. Simply tell me that you are from Joi Bangla and you don't have a ticket. I'll let you go without a single question. You are supposed to stay in refugee camps. Instead, you are traveling free of cost to visit your Mashi's house, Pishi's house, zoos, museums, etc. When we don't recognize you, you don't even have a minimum decency to tell your problem."

Ever since liberation, I have seen only to hate India for its help to liberate Bangladesh in 1971. It may sound strange. It may not be wise to express openly; but the truth is that the Bangladeshis could not take easy the defeat and humiliation of brother Pakistan at the hands of infidel India. It is a strange psycho-religious problem. During the liberation period, many Rabindrasangeets caused massive thrill in blood stream which inspired and motivated young people to die for liberation. I never hear those songs anymore past our liberation in 1971.

I was enjoying all possible free stuff while I was a refugee in India. What was wrong to expect something more? Why not somebody take me to Shantiniketon to visit the grand institution of Tagore? I looked behind with grief as I had come too close but couldn't see it. I missed the landscape of Shantiniketon, the desk, chairs, beds, clothes he used, his footprints, his breaths, and his soul still present in the air. I treasured so many great imaginations. Why couldn't there be a mechanical trouble with the train engine? So many things happen every day in the railway

system and the train cannot run on schedule. Why not such a single event had happened at Bolpore station that day?

Finally my dream came true on 24 May 2007 but ending to sadness. My wife Minu, nephew Palash and I boarded a superfast train from Sealdah Railway station. The train left the platform right in time, 9:00am. It was super hot and humid in the platform. But the AC compartment in the train was super cold. We didn't have extra clothes. In Bolpore got down to furnace. It was several layers higher in temperature scale. I claim to be strong to survive in hot weather but I think I reached to the pick of my ability.

I expected to see a beautiful landscape of Bolpore, with planed roads, decorated tree trunks as in expensive island resorts. But to my dismay, Bolpore was nothing but an ordinary small dwelling place with no difference from any other stations in West Bengal. I saw rickshaws, narrow and damaged roads, malnourished ordinary people on the walk and vendors with handicrafts under open sky. I saw no trace to believe that only a few decades back a great philosopher of the world lived and established a unique academic institution in this little town.

We took two rickshaws at Rs10.00 each. The rickshaw pullers took us to a beautiful hotel with name, "Shantiniketon". This was just the name of the hotel not the place that we went to visit. To tell the truth upfront, this was probably the best place in Bolpore that we visited.

We got only a single AC room with two narrow beds. Palash was not allowed to stay with us. So we agreed to pay for a non-AC room in his name. We took shower and had lunch in the hotel. And then all on a sudden, out of nowhere, there was a heavy rain. It came with God's blessing on us. The whole of Bolpore got an unexpected relief. The weather became so comfortable as if it were a autumn morning.

It was about 3:00pm. We needed rickshaws again to visit the real Shantiniketon. As we got out of the hotel premises, we got Sheikh Motiur Rahman with his fellow rickshaw-puller, Ananda. Motiur came forward with a full face of smile, "We brought you here and we know you would need us again to visit Tagore's Shantiniketon. So we have been waiting for you." He gave a detail list of places he would take us to. His description was so vivid and complete as if he has passed with distinction a rigorous course to be a guide at Shantiniketon. It was not possible to memorize the names of all places he mentioned. But he assured that for Rs120.00 each, they will take us to different important places for three to four hours as needed. And he kept his promise. His presentation was vivid and very professional. It was very pathetic that such a knowledgeable and intelligent man could not manage a good job because of lack of his formal education.

It took about 3 minutes of rickshaw time to Shantiniketon from hotel Shantiniketon. He stopped at every important point. He walked with us leaving his rickshaw at roadside and explained every spot with historical references. He showed Chhateem Tola, open air classrooms, place for graduation ceremony, dorms, and prayer room for all ideologies. He showed sculptures on lawns and told the names of the sculptors. He even explained rightfully the theme of each sculpture.

We wanted to take pictures of sculptures. On-duty guards told us not to take any. However, we managed to take many pictures even in front of the noses of the guards.

This campus was not the one that I really wanted to see. It was remarkably a poorly managed campus. There are lots of big and small trees with no visible signs that there is any person responsible to look them after. Motiur showed the places where a teacher and his disciples sit for a class under the sky. The sculptures have sheds but the grounds around are not well-kept, uncontrolled grasses are in control to take over. The sculptures are not cleaned for years. Maybe, the authority wants their pale look as marks of antiquity.

We visited the Rabindra Bhaban, a highly restricted area of great tradition and history, pride and honor, dignity and respect. There were rain waters scattered everywhere. We had to look on the ground to walk safely. At the gate, several guards control the entry of visitors. Taking of picture is prohibited. You walk in with your body and attire. Not even a small handbag is allowed. Minu was in trouble with her ornaments, fifteen hundred dollars in cash, and passports in her handbag. They had a single reply. Handbags are just not allowed. However, our US nationality finally worked. Minu got permission to carry her handbag.

The entry fee was probably just Rs 2.00. So you can imagine the dire condition of the museum where the emblem of the Nobel Prize is located. As mentioned earlier, the sudden rain came to relieve us from hot, humid and harsh weather. But as soon as we entered the museum, the hot and humid air inside reminded us every moment to get out of the museum as quickly as possible. Even the greatest attraction to stand and meditate to feel the presence of Tagore, his breaths and soul evaporated soon due to the harsh condition inside the museum house. All documents of Tagore are preserved in the museum in old and dilapidated shelves. The authority probably has weakness towards antiquity; old things suit better in old racks. This museum gives you nothing except the feeling that you are visiting the place and some belongings of Tagore. I really could not like the way the history of Tagore is being preserved. What is wrong to keep the valuables in good condition with good looks and in air conditioned room?

It was the summer time. So we did not see any students or faculty in the campus. The campus is merged with the dwellings of citizens around. There is no marked beginning and ending of the campus. Tagore was a Jamindar, he was six feet and two inches tall. With his great creations in literature, music, and arts, he is known beyond the boundary of India. He is at zenith. But the dire condition of the campus with its structures coupled with poor maintenance has brought him down to earth. Shantiniketon is now a psychological place of sentiment. It does not have any caretaker except some indigenous people, called Shnaotals, dwelling outside the campus. The rain broke trees and branches. They fell on the ground blocking the streets. Thanks to Shnaotal girls who picked them off for home cooking.

I saw one statue of Gandhi as Motiur pointed to. I saw one broken one on the ground with no head and lower part from the waist. I don't know who it belongs to. But I did not see any standing statue of Tagore.