International Summer Research or Residency Award

Debopam Sen, 2025
Research at Bolpur, Santiniketan, West Bengal , India
Curriculum & Instruction

This research trip, made possible by the generous support of the Global Engagement Office and the assistance of Dr. Christopher Kirchgasler (UW Madison) Dr. Indranil Acharya (Vidyasagar University) and Dr. Biswajit Roy (Visva-Bharati University), was a preliminary investigation into rural reconstruction as a global phenomenon in the early to mid-20th century. My broader research examines how intellectuals, reformers, and governments across different regions—India, China, and the United States—turned to the rural as a critical site for experimentation, intervention, and transformation during a period of deep political and economic change.

Rabindranath Tagore's Sriniketan project, while unique in its ideological underpinnings, provides a valuable entry point into this global history. My goal is not simply to study Tagore's philosophy or educational reforms, but rather to understand how rural reconstruction emerged as a shared conceptual and practical response to modernity, colonialism, and social inequality.

The work that I was able to do in Santiniketan, India, was primarily archival. I was able to achieve two things during my trip: a map of the archive and its holdings in addition to careful reading of a few documents. At the Rabindra Bhavana archives, I located one rare pamphlet besides other documents pertaining minutes, pamphlets, and speeches. These documents shed light on the structure, ethos, and operations of the Sriniketan project:

●Bratibalak (ব্রতীবালাক) Magazine (First Three Issues)
 These pamphlets describe the mobilization of youth for village development work—ranging from sanitation to agriculture and healthcare.

●Brahmavidyalaya by Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty
 While focused on early schooling at Santiniketan, this text offers a window into Tagore's evolving ideas about community-based development prior to the establishment of formal institutions.

●Minutes from the Surul Samiti and Sriniketan Board of Directors
 These administrative records illuminate the planning and decision-making behind Sriniketan's initiatives, and provide insight into how a quasi-autonomous rural program functioned within the constraints of colonial governance.

●Speech by Rabindranath Tagore in Kolkata
 This speech, delivered at a shop selling Sriniketan-made goods, illustrates the economic dimensions of the project—specifically, its focus on sustainable livelihoods and artisanal dignity.

●Sriniketan Palli-Seva Vibhaager Pratibedan (শ্রীনিকেতন পল্লী-সেবা বিভাগের প্রতিবেদন) by Kalimohan Ghose
 This rare 16-page pamphlet outlines Sriniketan's core mission as a training center for rural crafts and skills. It reinforces the idea that the project was an independent effort to build self-reliant rural communities. It is interesting to see how the brati-balak program took inspiration and partly modeled on the Boy Scouts.

What makes Tagore's Sriniketan particularly compelling is its resonance with similar rural reconstruction efforts occurring globally during the same period. These projects were not necessarily connected, but they shared a historical moment: one where the rural was reimagined as the locus for national regeneration, moral renewal, and socioeconomic transformation.

Moving forward, I plan to continue archival work at Santiniketan, especially in the Sriniketan library, to locate training manuals, extension materials, and documentation of rural initiatives that can be analyzed alongside materials from China and the United States. I will also meet with Dr. Amit Hazra, professor in the Department of Lifelong Learning and Extension at Visva-Bharati, whose expertise in rural management and grassroots development will offer valuable historical and practical context.

This trip has laid the foundation for a longer-term research project exploring the global history of rural reconstruction. I am deeply grateful to the Global Education Committee for supporting this initial phase of inquiry.