

# Gardens and Landscape of Uttarayan, Shantiniketan

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**Abstract:-** Uttarayan is a unique landscape of houses and gardens situated amidst tree groves, built in early twentieth century for the poet-laureate Rabindranath Tagore, just north of Visva-bharati University campus in West Bengal. Uttarayan gardens exemplify indigenous modernism in India, rooted in history and vernacular traditions, yet a clear departure from historic precedents in bringing about a creative synthesis of the old and the new. The landscape represents no clear rupture from the past, but a selective continuity with the ancient ideal of living in a forest, blended with a cosmopolitan outlook that was open to inventing new forms to accommodate modern sensibilities. Hybridity is a key feature of Uttarayan gardens, evident in eclectic borrowing of motifs and a playful use of nature tropes from many garden traditions across the globe. The long-established traditions of garden making in the Indian subcontinent were transformed in favor of an eclectic mix of styles drawing upon both Western and Eastern idioms. The paper will trace the many design vocabularies—Indo-Islamic, colonial, and East-Asian-- and ways in which they were transformed and amalgamated in creating a new garden aesthetic in Shantiniketan, representing early stirrings of landscape modernism in India.

**Keywords:** Landscape, garden, modernism, hybridity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Shantiniketan's origins go back to 1863 when Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's father, had a revelation when he was sitting under a tree in the desolate landscape of the Birbhum district, 160 km north of Calcutta. Slowly the area known as Bhubandanga (meaning inhabited by dacoits) was transformed from a denuded landscape of ravines and gullies by replenishing its soils and planting trees to create an *ashram* (hermitage). The young Rabindranath who had many enthralling experiences in this landscape opened a school for young boys in 1901 that grew into a college by 1921, and a central university by 1951, a decade after his death (Pal 2011). The transformation of wilderness into a garden was guided by the archetypal Indic image of *tapovan* where nature is purified of its demonic attributes by the penance of wise sages who meditate, write treatises, and educate the young. The campus landscape known as *ashram* evolved in the image of the sacred grove and became the twentieth century manifestation of the ancient Indic ideal of retreat to nature for cultivating knowledge and wisdom. The sylvan landscape of shady tree-groves with outdoor classroom spaces where no building is taller than a tree reflected Tagore's belief that rhythms of nature inspire music, arts, dance, and creative writing.

The five houses in the Uttarayan (denoting the time period during which sun moves into the northern hemisphere) enclave which Tagore built north of Ashram and in which he lived in the last two decades of his life were settings for his many creative pursuits—writing, painting, composing and performing dance dramas. The poetic names of the houses—Konarak (sun angle) built in 1919-22, Udayan (garden) in 1922-25, Shyamali (dark woman) in 1935, Punascha (postscript) in 1936, and Udichi (north) in 1938—reflect Tagore's aesthetic sensibilities and artistic creations. The houses were named Udayan meaning dawn, Udichi to rise, Konarak or sun's rays and were a play upon Tagore's name Rabindranath with its etymology in the Sanskrit word Ravi (Rabi in Bengali) meaning sun (Sanyal 2015). The architecture of gardens and houses in Uttarayan mirrored Tagore's growth of self towards individuation and are key to understanding why he called Shantiniketan 'abode of peace' and Visva-Bharati as the place where the 'world finds a nest'. Tagore wrote in 1895 (Chinna Patrabali, reprinted by Visva-Bharati 1992 as quoted in Das 2012, 143):

If I have a garden on the banks of the Ganga and a cool, spotlessly clean, marbled room in one corner on the bank only, a couch to lean against, a desk for writing, and just the garden and the water and the sky for the rest—the fragrance of blossoming flowers and the chirping of birds—then I can silently discharge my duties as a poet.

## II. INDIGENOUS MODERNISM

Uttarayan gardens exemplify indigenous modernism in India, rooted in history and vernacular traditions, yet a clear departure from historic precedents in bringing about a creative synthesis of the old and the new. The art of Shantiniketan has been labelled 'contextual modernism' with its origins in the local craft aesthetic and historic art motifs, reinterpreted in a new stylistic grammar (Kumar 1997). This movement impacted architecture and landscape design as well, thereby uniting aesthetic production of the place. The gardens are a unique statement of indigenous modernism, defined not as a rupture from the past, but a selective continuity with the ancient ideal of living in a forest. They are a result of innovative experiments to meet functional requirements, and creative blend of motifs drawn from diverse garden traditions. As such they define a new aesthetic. It can be argued that they represent early stirrings of landscape modernism in India similar to proto modernism of early 20<sup>th</sup> century gardens in North America that predated the post war modern suburban garden (Treib 1990). Like their Western counterparts, they complemented

the house and established continuity between architecture and landscape. Unlike international modern landscape design of a later period, they had room for creative interplay between historical precedents and contemporary design. Hybridity is a key feature of Uttarayan gardens, evident in eclectic borrowing of motifs and a playful use of nature tropes from many garden traditions across the globe. Homi Bhabha (1994) describes hybridity as the site of cultural productivity between cultures that challenges the notions of originality and purity. The art of garden making in Shantiniketan in colonial India was transformed by cultural encounters with both the West and the far East. The gardens subverted established canons by collaging many design vocabularies and using irony as a design tactic.

Uttarayan landscape has not been studied and therefore has not received its due place in garden scholarship in India. With the aim of rectifying this omission, fieldwork was done in fall and spring of 2018-19. It consisted of visual documentation, site mapping, interviews with the garden superintendent, and archival research in Rabindra Bhavan museum. Uttarayan is spread over 12 acres of a wooded site. The gardens were made between 1919-1938 in tandem with the construction of houses, of which Udayan is the largest and most imposing. They are likely the product of collaboration between several people, among whom Rathidranath, eldest son of Rabindranath, took the lead. With a baccalaureate degree in agricultural sciences from University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, and research experience in agricultural crops and pesticides at Sriniketan, he combined scientific innovation with artistic creativity in designing Uttarayan. He collaborated with the architect Surendranth Kar and the Japanese artisan Kimtaro Kasahara who also helped him in designing furniture and interior woodwork of Udayan. The gardener Ram Dass, earlier employed by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Maharaja of Burdwan, assisted them in garden-making. Rabindranath's letters indicate that he took a personal interest in plantings at Uttarayan, not surprising for one whose poems and essays reveal a great love for nature.



Figure 1: Uttarayan Layout

### III. GARDENS IN THE GROVE

The *tapovan* trope was taken further in making Panchbati in Uttarayan grove by planting five trees (Ashok, Pipal, Amalaki, Bat, and Bael) on Rabindranath's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. The trees, now fully grown, describe a circle with a clearing in the center with the view to a pond. The kidney shaped pond is named Pampa Sarovar, after the lake in Ramayan where Ram and Lakshman stop in their search for abducted Sita and wait out the monsoons in a cave. It has two islands—one larger than the other—made of boulders with shrubs and trees growing out of them, recalling the isles of eight immortals of Daoism. It also has a sculpture by Ramkinkar Baij of a large fish eating a small fish, a popular image in Indic thought, representing the law of the jungle-- of the mighty devouring the weak.





Figure 2 a: Panchbati



Figure 2 b: Pampa Sarovar



Figure 3 a: Fish sculpture



Figure 3 b: Guha Ghar

Guhaghar, literally cave-house, the lower part of a two storied small building to the east of Pampa Sarovar has a façade of cement concrete stones, resembling a mountain in built form. It was Ratindranth's studio while the upper floor called Chitrabhanu, directly accessed by a flight of steps from Japani Bagaan, was where his wife, Pratima Devi, made ceramic pottery and batik paintings. Both floors are large live-work spaces, lined with wood paneling and shelves, and have elegantly designed wood furniture. The large circular window set in a wooden frame with a cross is an arresting feature of the building façade facing the pond. This whimsically designed quaint building functions as a folly, overlooking both Japani Bagh and *tapovan*, juxtaposed yet separated by a wall

Japani Bagaan (Japanese garden), south of Udayan, does not subscribe to the tea or zen garden model, but uses tropes employed in Sino-Japanese gardens such as island, hermit on the mountain, winding paths, urns, and rookeries. Instead of borrowing scenery in distant vistas, a popular design feature of East Asian gardens, Japani Bagaan is enclosed by high walls. Although named Japani and designed with input from Kasahara, it is far from being a faithful copy of any Japanese precedent. There are only subtle hints of East Asian garden traditions mixed with allusions to Rajput and southeast Asian architectural detailing. The focus of the garden is a lily pond abutting a raised plaza with curving low planter walls and pedestals for vases. A free standing one-pointed conical archway dominates the plaza, on one side of which is a bust of Rabindranath by a Polish sculptor. The ensemble evokes a hermit and his hut on the mountain, a common trope in Chinese and Japanese gardens. It is surrounded by curvilinear raised flower beds, edged by clay tiles, on all sides. Clumps of rocks are found in the middle of flower beds, one of which has a stone carved with human faces in four directions, similar to *Shiva linga*. The Udayan garden façade has two decorative panels on either side of the entry door (now closed) reminiscent of Javanese wooden detailing in which two blind windows with cusped arched frames have been inserted. Ceramic urns, one placed within a columnar structure, and on raised circular planter beds add visual foci to the garden.





Figure 4 a: Japani Bagaan



Figure 4 b: Udayan viewed from Japani Bagaan

Doors on the western façade of Udayan open into a garden split into two levels—Unchu and Neechu Bagaans—laid out in geometric patterns similar to the Indo-Islamic garden, but the simplex four square layout has evolved into more complex patterns of parterres. The axis rather than being defined by water channels and pathways is implied. The lower-level garden adjacent to the house has seven parterres outlined by clay tiles in indented quadrangular shapes. In the center of four parterres is a Crepe Myrtle tree growing in a cruciform shaped planting bed. In axis with the tree is an ornate water tank like a *mandala* (sacred diagram) with a shrub growing out of an island. These are symbols of the tree of life rising out of the earth and the waters. Other quadrangles also have trellis or bushes in the center. The upper-level garden—Unchu Bagaan-- is accessed by a low flight of steps in two different risers and enclosed by a low wall with openings in different shapes, a few inset with terracotta panels carved with foliage. This garden too has a central feature—a fountain in three tiers rising out of a tank faced with terracotta panels showing a *makar* (crocodile). The fountain is placed in a triple- foliated parterre with flowerbeds on all sides.



Figure 5 a: Neechu Bagaan

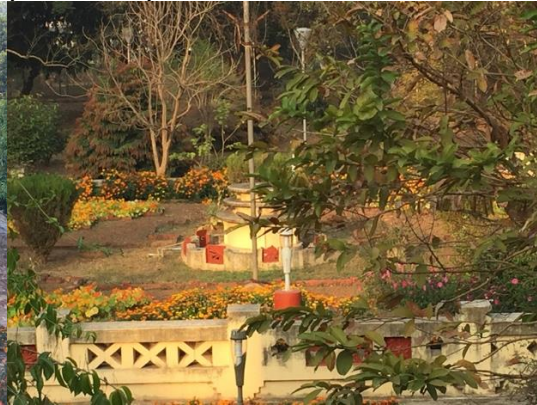


Figure 5 b: Unchu Bagaan

The colonial bungalow garden is subverted in Gulab Bari. The rose garden is placed in the front entry area along with the tennis court, similar to the location of the colonial garden in front of the bungalow. It lacks, however, its most important feature, the ubiquitous lawn edged by herbaceous borders. Instead, an intricate geometrical pattern is set up by wide concrete paths separating the flower beds—square with a cross in the center surrounded by L-shaped beds forming rectangles. The densely planted gardens become a riot of colors when the roses are in bloom during the cool winters. The carpet of roses can be viewed in all its glory from the balcony and windows of the upper floor of Udichi and Udayan.





Figure 6: Gulab Bari

Ratindranath's horticultural experiments resulted in his designing vertical gardens or *lata bagaans* (vine gardens) that are cool shaded spaces for walking and sitting. Yet another variant is *Malathibithan*, a threshold to the open court around which the four cottages are located, similar to a Japanese style Torri Gate. It is an extended gateway designed as two sets of four twin columns supporting beams covered with *Malati* creeper. Seat walls in *jaali* (lattice) patterns provide ample seating for visitors today. The arbor taking several turns from the gardens behind Udayan to the front entry court was made by converting fruit trees--mango, mulberry, jamun and guava---into vines by tying their soft branches with metallic clips to the arching frame. Another example of *lata bagaan* can be seen in the free-standing curving walls with windows but no roof and covered with vines on the east and west of the verandah of Punascha. These shaded spaces were used by Rabindranath for reading and painting. Chatal *bagaans* are quaint patio gardens, representing a picturesque aesthetic of ruins with overgrown vegetation. The garden between Konarak and Shyamali was indeed built upon the plinth of a demolished house--Mrinmoyee. The patio supports pergolas with seat walls on all four corners, and the one on the northwest corner is similar to a *mandap* with a roof on four columns. Gacch Ghar (tree house), with a pillar in the center supporting the vines growing into the lattice roof overlooks the grove and the garden west of Udayan. It is an elevated structure meant for viewing the landscape with steps leading down to both the garden and grove, thus linking them.



Figure 7: Chatal Bagaan



Figure 8: Lata Bagaan

#### IV. ART IN THE LANDSCAPE, WALLS, FRAMES

Modern art dots the landscape and creates its own rooms with green walls in small gardens of water or pebbled courts. Iconic pieces in cement concrete by Ramkinkar Baij (in addition to 'Fish' in Pampa Lake)—'Santhal Family', 'Thresher', and 'Sujata'--are situated at the periphery of the open entry court, set against the backdrop of green foliage. 'Matsyavatara' by A. Ramachandran rises out of a lotus pond within a planting bed edged by the emblematic clay tiles, with a backdrop of a banana

tree, next to the well (now closed) and its washing platform, north of Udayan. 'Maiya' by K.S. Radhakrishnan, on a high square pedestal, is visually prominent as one enters the forecourt. The sculptures are modernist interpretations of the local Santhals and mythic figures and add a quixotic touch to the landscape.



Figure 9 a: Santhal Family



Figure 9 b: Maiya

Near Pampa Lake is an octagonal Phanki Ghar (bird house), elegantly designed with openings mimicking cusped arch doorways, and an ornate disc shaped crest. This is evocative of the Ramayan landscape, a natural garden around a water body teeming with birds. Another pankhi ghar with alcoves of different sizes and forms is built within Japaani bagaan wall. Near the entry to the pragan, the main courtyard towards which the houses face, is the round saras ghar for housing cranes with a conical straw roof and a low brick wall. Walls demarcate gardens enclosing them as outdoor rooms mediating between interior spaces and surrounding groves. Japani Bagaan is enclosed by high walls and has a watch tower with alcove like openings that are repeated throughout in the garden wall. The tapering door opening on the west is set within a portal. The walls around Unchu and Neechu Bagaans are lower with wide views to the grove beyond and have openings of different shapes, some decorated with terracotta tiles. The doorway to Pampa Lake with a rounded cusped arch is set within a portal. The landscape is framed in openings—windows, balconies, and colonnades. In viewing the gardens from upper floors of houses, their layout is revealed as a unified composition. Japani Bagaan and Nichhu and Unchu Bagaans, south and west of Udayan respectively are viewed from its windows and terraces. Gulab Bari can be viewed from the balconies of Udayan and Udichi.



Figure 10: Tagore framed in the verandah of Punascha (photograph by Sambhu Saha; source: Rabindra Bhavan archives)

## V. CONCLUSION

Uttarayan is a popular heritage site in Shantiniketan, and was visited by 162, 300 tourists in 2016-17. They are restricted to the entry court from where they can view the landscape but not enter the gardens or walk amidst the groves. They cannot view the gardens from the balconies and terraces of Udayan and Udichi as was originally intended. Their experience remains incomplete without a full understanding of how nature was improved and perfected in the grove and the garden. Garden tours can be planned so that the ever-increasing volume of visitors can experience the place in small batches at a time thereby causing minimal damage



to the fragile landscape. Uttarayan's garden and landscape heritage can be communicated to the public in poetry readings and dramaturgical performances as well. Uttarayan is a unique blend of the local and the global in its building and garden architecture. Its gardens are examples of early modernism in India when historicism was challenged in all creative pursuits including garden-making. They represent an era when botanical knowledge and horticultural experiments began to aid the quest for perfecting nature. The long-established traditions of garden making in the Indian subcontinent were subverted in favor of an eclectic mix of styles drawing upon both Western and Eastern idioms. New forms were invented to accommodate new and modern sensibilities. The gardens are a product of innovative experimentation in forms, materials, and technologies, ushering in a new aesthetic in landscape design. They mediate between the built and the natural in connecting the houses with the surrounding tree groves and as outdoor rooms, thresholds, and connectors, expand the landscape design language. The design experiment at Uttarayan succeeded in not only creating a harmonious blend between disparate vocabularies but also synthesized something unprecedented in garden design.

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