

Revival of the spirit of Sriniketan

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Rabindranath Tagore shared with Mahatma Gandhi the vision of a strong and self-reliant India. The ideas that led him to found the Institute of Rural Reconstruction at Sriniketan, very close to Santiniketan are as relevant as they were almost 100 years back. Noted agricultural scientist, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan has felt the need to revive the spirit of Sriniketan. Pioneering the concept of agricultural transformational centres, the new Sriniketan will find ways and means to attract the youth in farming and processing of farm products for higher value addition. With the modern scientific applications of bio-technology and eco-technology, young people will find farming both intellectually stimulating and economically rewarding.

Introduction : Rabindranath Tagore not only founded the Visva-Bharati, but also Sriniketan, which was a model centre for rural welfare and agricultural development. Putting great emphasis on village welfare activities, he said: "We have to reconstruct our national life with the village as the centre. To bring completeness of life to the village has been a dream of mine of long standing."

Under the able stewardship of Leonard Elmhirst, the Institute of Rural Reconstruction at Sriniketan acted as the centre of all rural activities. One of the aims and objectives of the Sriniketan institute was "To take the problem of villages and the field to the classroom for study and discussion and to experimental farm for solutions; to carry the knowledge and experience gained in the classroom and experimental farm to the villages – to teach them better methods of growing crops and vegetables and of keeping livestock."

It is interesting to note that while celebrating the 50th year of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) in 1979, Dr M S Swaminathan introduced the concept of "Lab to Land" which was a fitting tribute to Tagore's ideas. Perhaps Tagore was far ahead of his times, and thus the work that he started at Sriniketan almost a century back finds even greater relevance today.

Rural Reconstruction : The New Sriniketan :

U.S. President, Barak Obama, during his recent visit to India, had mentioned that out of a total population of 1.2 billion people in India, over 600 million people are under the age of 30 and over 60% of these young persons live in the villages. The migration of educated youth from villages to town and cities, Mahatma Gandhi once remarked, is the most serious form of brain-drain which adversely affects rural development. He, therefore, stressed

on the need to bridge the gap between intellect and labour in rural professions.

Tagore in a letter to Leonard Elmhirst dated 19th December, 1937 wrote "Our people need more than anything else, a real scientific training that can inspire in them a courage of experiment —

Sriniketan would be able to provide its pupils an atmosphere of rational thinking and behaviour which alone can save them from stupid bigotry and moral cowardliness." Thus, Sriniketan became an integral part of Visva Bharati continuing academic excellence with social and rural realities.

M.S. Swaminathan in a recent paper titled "Gurudev Tagore, Child Education and Social Synergy" has pointed out the need to revive the spirit of Sriniketan. It is of prime importance that the youth of India should be attracted and retained in farming. The new Sriniketan can pioneer the concept of agricultural transformational centres.

Young people will take to agriculture when farming is both intellectually satisfying and economically rewarding. This will call for a technological and managerial upgradation of farm operations. The new Sriniketan should pioneer the concepts of eco-technology where science and technology will be combined with the best in traditional knowledge and ecological prudence.

Tagore visualized the role of Sriniketan as a centre where every scholar would become an entrepreneur. The same ideas have been echoed in the National Policy for Farmers placed in Parliament in November, 2007 where it has been felt that measures should be introduced to attract the youth in farming and processing of farm products for higher value addition.

In recent times, our returns from agriculture are reducing. While the pressure on land is increasing, the average size of a farm holding is going down to below one hectare. Prime farm lands are being used for non-farm purposes. Recent, surveys have indicated that farmers wanted to quit farming. The National Commission on Farmers has elaborated on the need to persuade educated youth, including farm graduates, to take part in agriculture as a profession. Tagore's vision of an economically strong and self-reliance India needs a re-visit. It has been suggested by national policy makers that a strategy be adopted to improve the productivity and profitability of small holdings through proper land use policies, technologies and market linkages. The scope of agro-industries and agri-

business should be enlarged ; and opportunities should be created in the services sector that will promote technological and economic upgradation of farm operations.

A concept has been discussed, named as an “Agricultural Transformation Centre” where farm graduates, ideally in a group of four to five, could jointly launch an agri-clinic-cum-agri-business unit, to provide a host of services during the production phase of farming as also the post-harvest phase of agriculture. These farm graduates should have specialised knowledge in agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, agri-business and home science. The multi-disciplinary expertise available within the group will help them to serve farm families in a holistic manner.

Conclusion:

It is time to rekindle the spirit of Sriniketan and the new Sriniketan will once again focus on the need to marry intellect with labour in the agricultural sphere so that the youth of India will find farming both intellectually stimulating and economically rewarding. This was the prescription given by Tagore through his Sriniketan experiments almost

hundred years’ back. Mahatma Gandhi also believed in the same way and it was at Sriniketan that these great souls had the vision of a strong and self-reliant India. Sriniketan is a legacy, through which the “Poet as a Plowman” wanted to preach a new religion, a new philosophy that he carefully inscribed in his “The Religion of Man”. Tagore’s concerns about the future of humankind and about the future of India were all echoed in his Sriniketan experiments and they remain for us as a guideline in our future endeavours.

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