

Dakghar:
Notes Towards
Isolation
and
Recognition

Landings
(Natasha Ginwala and Vivian Ziherl)

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Behari Mukherjee, Waswo X.
Waswo and R. Vijay,
Andrzej Wajda, alongside
archival materials, and
field research by students
of the Dutch Art
Institute / MFA ArtEZ (DAI)

Dakghar: Notes Toward Isolation and Recognition

evokes a multi-character reading of Rabindranath Tagore's play *Dakghar* / The Post Office (1912). Archival material and artistic works perform as symbolic protagonists weaving together correspondences between Tagore, his collaborators, and the rural as a stage of modern encounters.

This research presentation undertakes figural readings of the play, tracing its reception in Europe while also casting a broader backdrop of Tagore's pedagogy of art as life-practice at the rural campus of Santiniketan (est. 1901), his travels through South East Asia pursuing 'Asian Modernity' as a force of civilizational contiguity and alliance-building, as well as his collective experiments in Rural Reconstruction and development of the handicrafts at Sriniketan (1921-41). A sequence of historical art works by Binode Behari Mukherjee, Ramendranath Chakravorty, Mukul Dey and Somnath Hore, present artists and printmakers who were mentored by Tagore, many of whom later taught at Santiniketan. Two recent works by Muktinath Mondal and Waswo X. Waswo with R. Vijay consider the subjects of art education, rural liveli-

hood and of letter-writing as a visual practice.

The allegorical plot of *Dakghar* centers upon the child protagonist Amal who suffers from an incurable malady and is thus enclosed in the 'protection' of a village courtyard. Amal is compelled to cultivate a projected imagination of the outside world upon the news that a post office is to be built in his village. This anticipated event provokes a horizon of desire in which the nearby village, the King's impending visit and a phantasmal life become conflated terrains. Written against the backdrop of anti-colonial critique, *Dakghar* ultimately considers the place of the soul within the narration of history.

Through these dynamic tensions of worldly encounter and subjective alienation, the multiple status of Tagore is explored as international traveler and cosmopolitan figure, as self-fashioned rural pedagogue, as poet, correspondent and public intellectual. Through parallel narrations, these trajectories inscribe each other across the dialectal stages of isolation and exposure, the home and the world, the intimate space of the letter and the political field of address.



**Mukul Dey (1895-1989),
Villagers of Selaidah Visiting
Rabindranath Tagore, 1916,
Hand-colored drypoint,
10 x 10 cm**

**Courtesy: The Waswo X.
Waswo Collection of Indian
Printmaking**

In Anticipation: Poet and Landlord

In Anticipation: Poet and Landlord

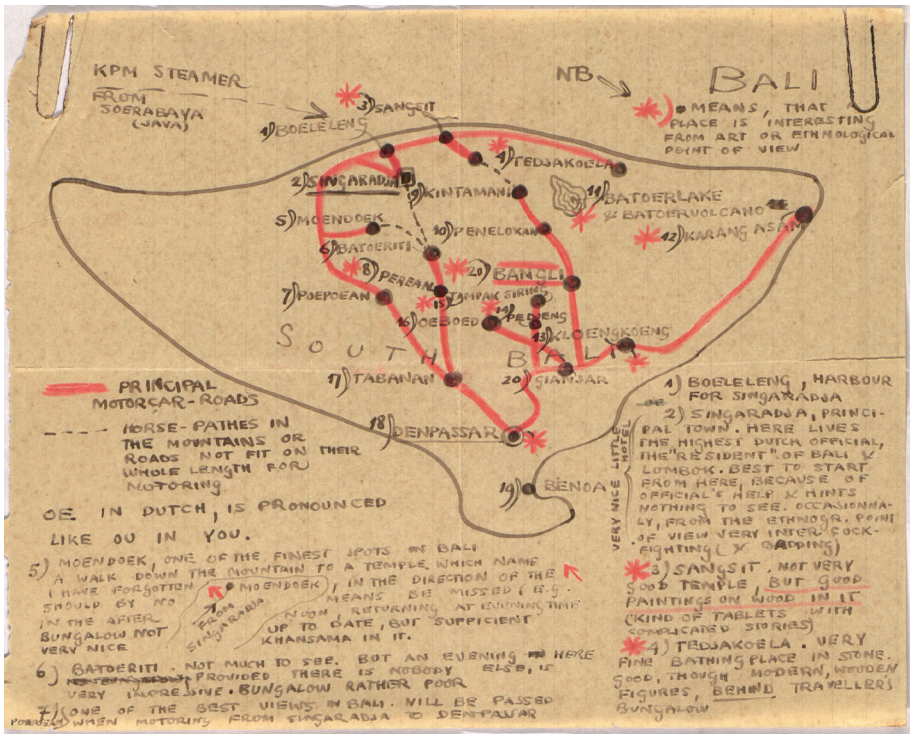
The Villagers of Selaidah visiting Rabindranath Tagore (1916), a drypoint etching by artist, printmaker and educator Mukul Dey (1895-1989) introduces the poet-philosopher through the inverse gaze of reception. In the late nineteenth century Tagore was placed in charge of his family estate in Selaidah then in eastern Bengal, now Bangladesh. In his capacity as landowner, Tagore chose to carry out agricultural experiments in cooperative farming, water management and food security while also conceiving plans for a rural school campus in which to enact his proposed educational reforms and pedagogic philosophy. This etching hence presents a charged scenography of the power dynamic between the villagers' anticipatory condition and the absent presence of the poet and landlord.

Dey began his artistic training at Santiniketan in 1906, soon assuming print-making as his primary medium. He accompanied Tagore on his first trip to Japan in 1916 and there studied Sumi-e ink wash painting under the Japanese master painters Yokoyama Taikan (1863-1913) and Shimomura Kanzan (1873-1930). Further travelling with Tagore to the United States, Dey trained in etching and printmaking at the workshop of Chicago-based graphic artist, puppeteer and stage designer James Blanding Sloan (1886-1971). During this time he became associated with the Chicago Society of Etchers.

Throughout his international travels, Tagore was accompanied by artists and scholars associated with Santiniketan. It was thereby through direct exposure to international figures and cultural histories that a dynamic curriculum and peer exchange was established at Santiniketan, such that despite being in the interior of the country it emerged as a cosmopolitan site of arts education and practice.

Throughout his life Dey undertook portrait studies of Tagore, his family and visiting dignitaries such as Polish pianist and politician Ignacy Jan Paderewski and Albert Einstein. Later training at the Royal College of Art and Slade School in London, Dey became a pioneer of drypoint etching in India and was one of the earliest Indian artists to exhibit internationally. Upon his return in 1927, Dey was appointed as the first Indian principal of the Government School of Art in Kolkata. Under this role he organized and sponsored the first exhibition of Rabindranath Tagore's painting to be held in India (1932). As Tagore's portraitist Dey critically mobilized the iconic

image of his teacher and travelling companion across the varied avatars of elite polymath, paternal educator and world-traveler.



Hand drawn map of Bali,
Author unknown, 1927.

Courtesy: Rabindra Bhavan,
Visva-Bharati

Asian Modernity as Itinerary

Tagore's 1927 expedition to South East Asia had been long prepared. During travel to the Netherlands in 1920 Tagore had visited the Colonial Institute of the Tropics in Amsterdam, conducting enquiries into sites of archeological interest and a potential travel itinerary. The journey was a research venture into the civilizational span of ancient India. During this travel Tagore wrote:

“the relics of the true history of India are outside India. For our history is the history of ideas, of how these, like ripe pods, burst themselves and were carried across the seas and developed into magnificent fruitfulness. Therefore, our history runs through the history of the civilization of Eastern Asia.”

Rabindranath Tagore, 1927
Letters from Java, ed. Supriya Roy,
Visva-Bharati, 2010

Over three and a half months Tagore undertook journeys to Singapore, Malaya, Java, Borneo, Sumatra and Indonesia on the French ship *Ambios*. He travelled in the company of the noted philologist Suniti Kumar Chatterji, the artist, photographer and architect Surendranath Kar, and the painter and musician Dharendra Krishna Deva Varman.

A program hailing Tagore's visit to Klang, then British Malaya, points to a doubled charge of exposure. It marks Tagore's own movement from a secluded realm of reflection and intensive writing during sea transit to an extensive circuit of public appearances and archaeological visits upon arrival. Tagore's travel to Indonesia, then the Dutch East Indies, had long been anticipated by members of the Javanese cultural elite and by a grassroots educational movement. Dutch translations of Tagore's writings had been distributed since 1923 through the *Adi Postâkâ* publishing house, led by Raden Mas Noto Soeroto, editor of the *Oedaya* Javanese literary and arts journal.

The journey was undertaken with support of the Greater India Society, a network of Bengali scholars of the 1920s and 1930s dedicated to tracing ancient Hindu expansion in South East Asia. These efforts were contiguous with broader projects of early 20th Century pan-Asian alliance formation and an anti-colonial Asian consciousness. Tagore would later withdraw from the Greater India Society as it adopted an increasingly nationalist position, yet at this date the journey offered the grounds for reflection upon the archaic register of an 'Indian' subjective collectivity.

Hence, the hand-drawn map marking an itinerary of Balinese ‘sites of interest’ plots also Tagore’s own interested re-visioning of the nation and its socio-political constructions. Viewing the relics of ancient civilizational centers Tagore was provoked to critique the modern rural-urban divide and the materialist, secular divisions of private-public:

“In modern India, the life of the town is distinct from that of the villages. [...]

This Public was brought into being in its business quarters when, round the shops and the godowns of the East India Company, the City of Calcutta one day reared its head. But are we to accept this market crowd of a public as truly representative of the world of man, merely because of its numbers?”

Rabindranath Tagore, 19 July 1927
Letters from Java, ed. Supriya Roy,
 Visva-Bharati, 2010



Catalogue of Handicrafts,
Silpa-Bhavana Sriniketan,
Date unknown (1946-1950)

Courtesy: Nani Gopal Ghosh
and Swati Ghosh

Picturing Rural Education

“All around our ashram is a vast open country, bare up to the line of the horizon except for sparsely growing stunted date palms and prickly shrubs struggling with ant-hills.”

Rabindranath Tagore, ‘My School’, Personality, Macmillan, 1959

The stark landscape surrounding Santiniketan—situated over a hundred kilometers north of Kolkata in rural Bengal—was the setting upon which Tagore’s ideals of an aesthetic education were staged. These efforts took the form of an experimental campus established in 1901, and continuing until the present day. Former Santiniketan student and teacher Benode Bihari Mukherjee’s (1904-1980) drypoint etching of the surrounding *Birbhum Landscape* emblemizes Tagore’s pedagogic vision of ‘a school beneath the trees’ in which learning would occur in direct encounter with worldly experience, and in which art and life would hold a privileged and shared place within the school structure.

Santiniketan was originally established with a small group of ten pupils who were accepted without fees in the model of the *guru-sishya* forest-dwelling schools. Classes were held outdoors while the first departments to be launched were Fine Arts and Music (*Kala-Bhavan*) and Theatre and Dance (*Sangit Bhavan*). In order to found the campus, Tagore sold the rights to his entire literary estate up until that point. Over the remaining forty years his extensive travel and public lectures would provide crucial funds for the school. Hence, there existed an enmeshed relation among the circulations of cosmopolitan exchange and the isolation of the rural as an educational site. For example, as a direct result of Tagore's travel to South East Asia in 1927, Batik and Balinese-style dance dramas were introduced to the Santiniketan curriculum.

Conceived as a 'community against the Nation', Shantiniketan proposed a universalizing frame for collective learning that countered both western and traditionalist attitudes to pedagogy. Tagore's establishment of the school coincided with his withdrawal from the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1905-11, disappointed by its communal politics and ascendent patriotism. Surrounded by a heterogeneous population of Hindu, Muslim and Santhal villages, Santiniketan provided a basis for continued association between these resident communities, endeavoring toward an ethics of self-reliance.

The campus grew rapidly and in 1921 the Visva Bharati international university was established along with the Sriniketan Institute for Rural Reconstruction. Visva

Bharati would become the training ground for numerous artists of the Bengal School, as well as renowned figures such as film-maker Satyajit Ray, economist Amartya Sen and activist-writer Mahasweta Devi.

The basis of Sriniketan was established in 1912 when Tagore purchased land for an experimental farm in the village of Surul, a few kilometers west of the Santiniketan campus. The English agronomist Leonard K. Elmhirst led the project until 1924, establishing its program upon Tagore's 'Cooperative Principle' of self-reliance through interdependence. Rural development through handicrafts such as weaving, leather, laquer work and pottery, alongside agronomic training in both village and modern techniques were key facets of Sriniketan as a radical education system and as a research laboratory grounded in welfare principles. At the inaugural address of an exhibition of Sriniketan handicrafts in Kolkata, Tagore stated:

“To some of them I pointed out that the drama of national self-expression could not be real if rural India were banished to the outer darkness behind the stage [...]

I had started rural service with scanty means and a few companions. My agony did not merely show itself in my poems, it dragged the poet himself to the arduous field of work. What power could an indignant worker possess save in his vision of the truth? [...]

Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, date unknown



**Dakghar, Production
photograph of Calcutta
performance,
featuring Tagore, 1917 (#7134)**

**Courtesy: Rabindra Bhavan,
Visva-Bharati**

Dakghar: The Plot as Subversive Encounter

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“Let us not forget that imperialistic Europe today is herself entangled in a bondage which she has imposed upon alien peoples who are dragging them down with their weight of wretchedness.”

*Rabindranath Tagore, 9 May 1932
Journey to Persia and Iraq, ed. Supriya Roy,
Visva-Bharati, 2003*

Once awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913, Tagore in his travels throughout Europe was increasingly accorded the status of ‘unofficial emissary’. German newspapers reported scuffles and regular fights among those refused entry to Tagore’s lectures and

public appearances during his first tour in 1921. The visit drew the attention of leading literary figures of the time such as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke who had first encountered Tagore's work in a live reading by Andre Gide of his French translation of the Nobel awarded *Gitanjali*. Subsequent tours to Germany in 1926 and 1930 were reported as similarly successful, yet by 1933 the entire literary oeuvre of Tagore was suppressed and his visits curtailed.

The translation of Tagore's poetry and plays into European idioms provoked cross-cultural readings cutting transversally across the fissured conditions of 20th century Europe, and the increasingly anti-colonial climate within India during the same period. Attending a production of *Dakghar* (*Das Postamt*) held at the Volksbühne theatre in 1921, Tagore was moved to reflect upon the staging as an idealist scenography, a 'feary story', as counterposed to the spiritual and emancipatory impulse that had been the play's motive force. In a letter to C.F. Andrews dated June 4, 1921 Tagore wrote, "Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the open road – he seeks freedom from the uncomfortable enclosure of habits sanctioned by the prudent and walls of rigid opinions built for him by the respectable." Tagore goes on to speculate upon the comparisons of the character Amal to the nation of India in its quest for independence.

While the earliest performance of *Dakghar* in Germany took place in 1918, in Düsseldorf, the play was revived between the 1950s and 1960s across the country.

In most productions the child character Amal is played by women actors, rendering the determination of the character as an exercise of harmless will. In 1937 a production of *Dakghar* was staged at the Jewish Berliner Kulturbund Theater under the direction of Austrian-Jewish actor and director Fritz Wisten, who also headed the Volksbühne Berlin, and who was deported to internment in 1938. This production was widely reviewed by the Jewish press in Berlin.

The anticipatory aura of Tagore was no more pronounced in Europe than in Poland, where his stories, lectures and plays had been numerous translated since 1913, as recorded in the extensive research of scholar Elzbieta Walter. Despite public rumors spread in the Polish press, Tagore did not visit the country in 1920, nor would he visit Poland during subsequent travels to Europe. At the height of this expectant public mood the poet, translator, philosopher and mystic Antoni Lange even prepared a reception for Tagore by composing a welcome address in Sanskrit, later published within his collection of poems in 1925.

In 1942, a year after Tagore's passing and at the height of the Second World War, one of the most remarked upon productions of *Dakghar* took place within an orphanage of the Warsaw Ghetto. Less than three weeks after this staging on the 18th of July, the orphanage founder Janusz Korczak and his pupils were deported to the camp of Treblinka where they shortly thereafter perished. The acclaimed 1990 biopic *Korczak*, by Polish director Andrzej Wajda, depicts a scene

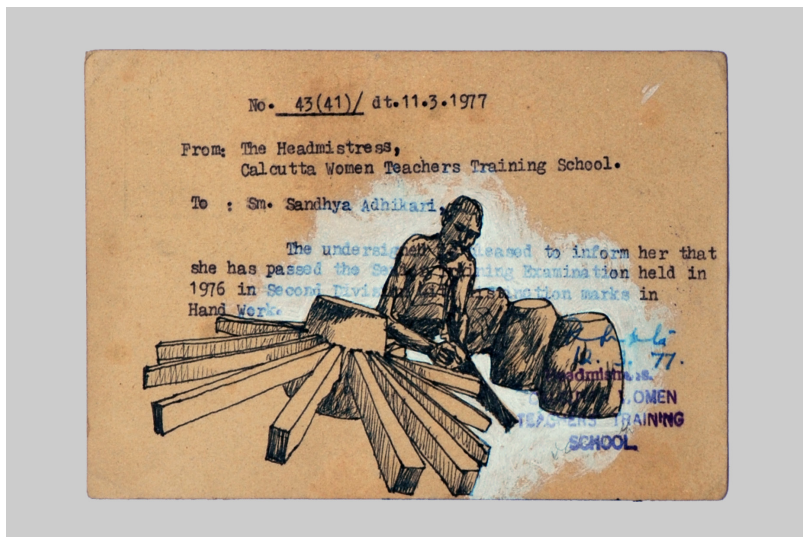
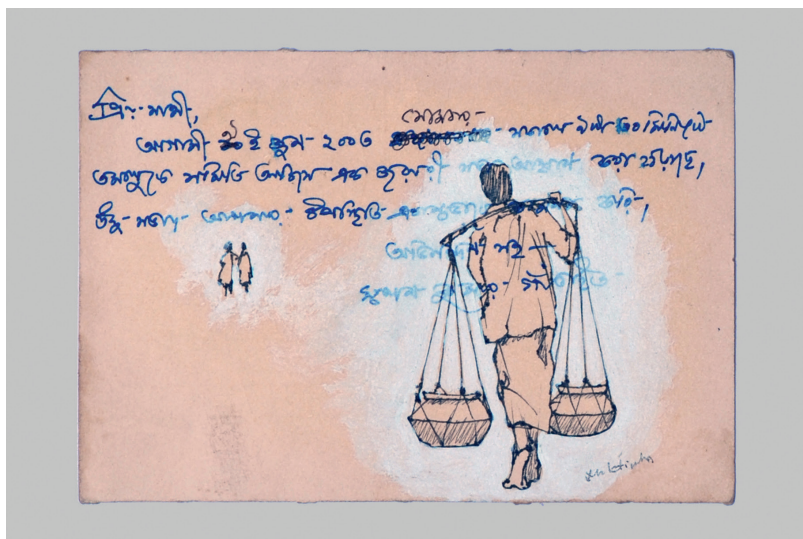
in which a young boy peers with curiosity out a small courtyard window. Within the mimetic correspondence of Amal and the orphanage students, the metonymic idealism of Dakghar is brought into confrontation with the stark political and material conditions of subjugation. The essential thread within the play that is bound to worldly concerns is hence encountered as entangled in a violent rejection and in endured extremity, foregrounding both the longer-term impact of colonial life and genocidal ruptures within the European edifice.

To some degree, this essay and exhibition display are imagined as a retroactive correspondence with Tagore's multi-faceted ideas and persona. He is evidenced as a spectral field upon which the current geopolitical conditions of a fortified and isolated Europe may be counterpoised with the political mobilizations of multiple and competing universalisms of a globalized present.



Somnath Hore, *Untitled*,
1st Trial Proof, 1972,
Etching, 8 x 6.5in

Courtesy: Akar Prakar



Muktinath Mondal, Letters,
2012–ongoing, Mixed media
on collected postcards,
7 x 5cm each

Courtesy: the artist
and Exhibit 320

Tagore's Post Office
neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst (nGbK), Berlin
29 March – 1 June 2014

Curator: Grant Watson

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Landings (Natasha Ginwala and Vivian Ziherl)

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