
Departmental Seminar

Seminar Title	: Crafts and the Landscape of Cultural Tourism at Santiniketan, India
Speaker	: Dr. Deepanjan Saha
Supervisor	: PA office
Venue	: Seminar room, Department of Planning and Architecture
Date and Time	: 17 Jun 2025 (4:30pm)
Abstract	: Santiniketan in West Bengal, India was declared as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) in 2023. This new status merits examination of existing patterns of tourism to manage its growth and plan for the future. The exclusive focus on historic buildings and landscapes of Visva-Bharati University campus in the nomination dossier implies the state's preoccupation with tangible heritage of the core area. Cultural tourism in Santiniketan, however, is a broader phenomenon drawing upon its rural environs, crafts and fairs, baul (minstrel) music, and ethnic cuisine. In generating and sustaining a creative economy and in its appeal to tourists, the surrounding landscape of the WHS complements the material heritage of Santiniketan historic buildings. Our paper is an overview of the ways in which this cultural landscape supports the craft based creative economy, tracing the historic roots of crafts production to its growth into a major draw for tourism today. The traditional rural crafts of Birbhum district (where Santiniketan is situated) were reinvigorated by the establishment of Sriniketan, part of Visva-Bharati campus, by the poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore a century ago to promote rural development in the surrounding region. Our ethnographic fieldwork in Santiniketan shows that this legacy has flourished and has shaped the unique 'Santiniketan aesthetic' inspiring artists and artisans alike thus resulting in blurring the boundary between art and craft. The vibrant creative economy generated and supported by crafts rests upon local entrepreneurship and has been largely self-organized. Although haats (rural markets) and the various melas (fairs) are primary attractions for tourists, the emergent cultural landscape also includes the more permanent arts and crafts shops. The spaces, differing in the variety of craft goods displayed and level of organization, range from wares spread on the ground, to improvised shops, and art studios with workshops. Cultural heritage, always constructed as being indigenous and local, is in this case dependent upon extra local networks since the sites of production, distribution, and consumption of crafts are connected in wide ranging networks across India, although the prevalent image of all being local and hand-made is a bonus for cultural tourism. The state has sought to capitalize on this and is promoting haats through subsidies and infrastructural support, in an attempt to create synergy. The cultural landscape is accommodating these new developments and is in the process evolving. It is also facing the challenge of commodification that would negatively impact the craft traditions. The paper will conclude with outlining a planning framework within which the landscape of craft-based creative economy can be conserved.