

# Settlement Growth in Kopai-Ajoy Inter-riverine Tract of Bolpur Sriniketan Block, Birbhum District: A Case Study on Santiniketan and its Surroundings

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The Kopai-Ajoy inter-riverine tract, located in the Bolpur-Sriniketan Block of Birbhum District, West Bengal, offers a dynamic environment influenced by both natural and man-made factors. Lateritic soils and tribal living have historically defined the region, which has experienced substantial socioeconomic and physical change, especially since Rabindranath Tagore founded Visva-Bharati University in the early 20th century. With an emphasis on patterns and trends from the late 20th century to the early 21st century, this study does a spatiotemporal analysis of settlement increase in the area. The study tracks how settlements have changed over time using topographic maps, satellite imagery, and census data. The results show a clear transition away from dense, nucleated towns and towards more scattered, linear layouts, especially along transit routes. This transition is largely driven by changing land use patterns, infrastructure expansion, and population pressure where patterns of rural and semi-urban transition meet cultural legacy. The Spatio-temporal dynamics of settlement growth in the area are examined in this case study, which focuses on Santiniketan and the nearby villages.*

**Keywords:** *Kopai-Ajoy inter-riverine tract, Visva-Bharati, Spatio-temporal analysis, Transition away, Settlement growth*

## **1. Introduction:**

The study of settlement geography looks at how human settlements have changed throughout time and how they are distributed across different types of terrain. Physical, socioeconomic, and historical variables interact in a complicated way to create settlement patterns in rural India. Because of its distinct geomorphological environment, changing land use patterns, and growing human intervention, the Kopai-Ajoy inter-riverine tract which is part of the Bolpur-Sriniketan Block of Birbhum District, West Bengal makes an excellent case for research on settlement growth. This tract, which is bordered to the north by the Kopai River and to the south by the Ajoy River, is a transitional area between the more fertile alluvial plains to the east and the lateritic uplands of western Birbhum.

After Visva-Bharati University was founded in the early 20th century, Santiniketan attracted tourists, artists, students, and intellectuals. The surrounding communities, including Surul, Bhubandanga, Ballavpur, and portions of Bolpur town, experienced physical, demographic, and socioeconomic growth because of this

influence's gradual expansion outside the institutional bounds. Due to population pressure, land use change, and rising urbanization, the formerly rural landscape is currently changing, altering the region's identity and ecological balance. With an emphasis on Santiniketan and its surrounding area, this study attempts to investigate the trends, causes, and effects of settlement increase in the Kopai-Ajoy interfluvium. Using a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates remote sensing, GIS mapping, census analysis, and field observations, it investigates the historical background, land use changes, infrastructure advancements, and socio-economic transitions. The demands of tourism, real estate growth, and infrastructure development have increased since Santiniketan was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2023. Thus, this study offers a pertinent examination of how a culturally significant environment is changing in response to modern developmental forces and the consequences of this change for the landscape's future.

## 2. Selection and Importance of the Study:

The Kopai-Ajoy inter-riverine tract was chosen because of its distinct physiographic features, cultural heritage, and recent changes in settlement. This area has a historically low population density, lateritic uplands, and little vegetation. It is located between the Kopai and Ajoy rivers. Despite these environmental constraints, it has developed into a thriving socioeconomic and cultural area, primarily because of the impact of Rabindranath Tagore's internationally recognized centre for education, the arts, and culture, Santiniketan. Santiniketan and the surrounding areas have seen a notable increase in population over the last few decades, mostly due to urban development, tourism, educational migration, and better access to regional centres like Bolpur. Because of this, the area is a perfect microcosm for researching land use change, cultural landscape modification, and rural-urban transition in a semi-arid lateritic belt.

## 3. Location of the Study Area:

The region known as 'Santiniketan and its Surroundings' includes the two mouzas (Bolpur and Bandhgora) of Raipur-Supur Gramme Panchayat (which has twenty mouzas) and the eight mouzas (Benuria, Ballabhpur, Surul, Taltor, Madhusadanpur, Syambati, Bayradihi, and Goalpara) of Ruppur Gramme Panchayat (which has sixteen mouzas) in the Bolpur-Sriniketan C.D. Block of Birbhum District (see vide fig.1). On the edge of the Chhotanagpur plateau are Santiniketan and the adjacent area. It is in the area where the Ajoy and Kopai rivers meet. Geographically, Santiniketan and the surrounding area are in the northern hemisphere between latitudes  $23^{\circ}38'15''\text{N}$  and  $23^{\circ}42'45''\text{N}$  and longitudes  $87^{\circ}37'33''\text{E}$  and  $87^{\circ}42'51''\text{E}$ .



**Figure-1: The Study Area**

(Source: Prepared by Researcher; based on literature information)

#### 4. Research Objectives:

The objectives of the present research are the followings:

- To recognize the background of settlement growth in the study area.
- To describe the major settlements existing in the earlier days of Santiniketan.
- To explore the settlement growth within the Santiniketan area.
- To elucidate the spatiotemporal scenario of settlement growth in the study area.

#### 5. Database and Methodology:

Any type of research's validity and reliability are determined by the methodology used in the study. Methodology is therefore essential for emphasising the key study findings. This study's major focus is descriptive, and it was produced utilising secondary data collected from a range of sources, including periodicals, books, journals, and articles. In this study, standard historical research methods have been used. Secondary sources (including census data) were used to collect the data, and the relevant literature was thoroughly examined. Following that, the analysis was finished with our objective in mind, and logical conclusions were reached. Toposheet of Survey of India, False Colour Image of IRS LISS-IV etc. have been used for the preparation of settlement maps.

#### 6. Background of Settlement Growth in Santiniketan and its Surroundings:

Settlement is the abode of living of human beings as per general notion. Both topographical and hydrological characters determine the locational pattern of settlement, settlement structural morphology of settlement etc. After construction, the railway began to change the morphology of urban/rural settlements. The land closer to the railway station became dearer. Villages close to Bolpur also grew in importance. Thus, Kalikapur mouza drew new settlers and Supur as a river outpost first lost its trade and then its people shifted to Bolpur (Mukherjee, 1961). Then, the government offices began to move to Bolpur from the surroundings, followed later by Postal and Medical services. All these pushed up the land prices in and around Bolpur, by twenty times in less than two decades (Ray and Chakraborty, 2007).

Historically, the process of urbanization induces infrastructural development. Infrastructural development also propagates the processes of urbanization. There is a direct correlation between the development of urbanization and development of infrastructure, each being the cause of the other. The study initially presumed that there is a positive correlation between urbanization and infrastructural development. Increase in the availability of infrastructure would increase the level of urbanization in the economy and vice-versa (Alam, 2011).

#### 7. Major Settlements in and around Santiniketan during 1860's:

On and before 1863, the main land of Santiniketan had a crowdless area. It contained only one house- Santiniketan *Griha*. There were several rural settlements in the surrounding area (Mukhopadhyay, 1991) (see vide fig.2). This are-

**(i) Supur:**

Past name was Subahupur in the south west of Santiniketan. Naval base Supur was the main centre for waterway communication in this region and connected with other places of the country and outside countries through waterway for trading purposes. In British time, indigo and silk industries, jewelers manufacture increased its importance and became a very developed place.

**(ii) Raipur:**

In the past, its name was Adampur. Culturally highly developed, this village was located on the bank of Ajay River and enriched with a green agricultural field, garden, water tank etc. There was a market for purchasing essential goods and a 'Rakhareshwar' temple which was established in 1812 by Jagamohan Sinha (brother of Bhuban Mohan Sinha).

**(iii) Surul:**

This settlement was developed by the hand of the 'Sur' community in the south west of Santiniketan.

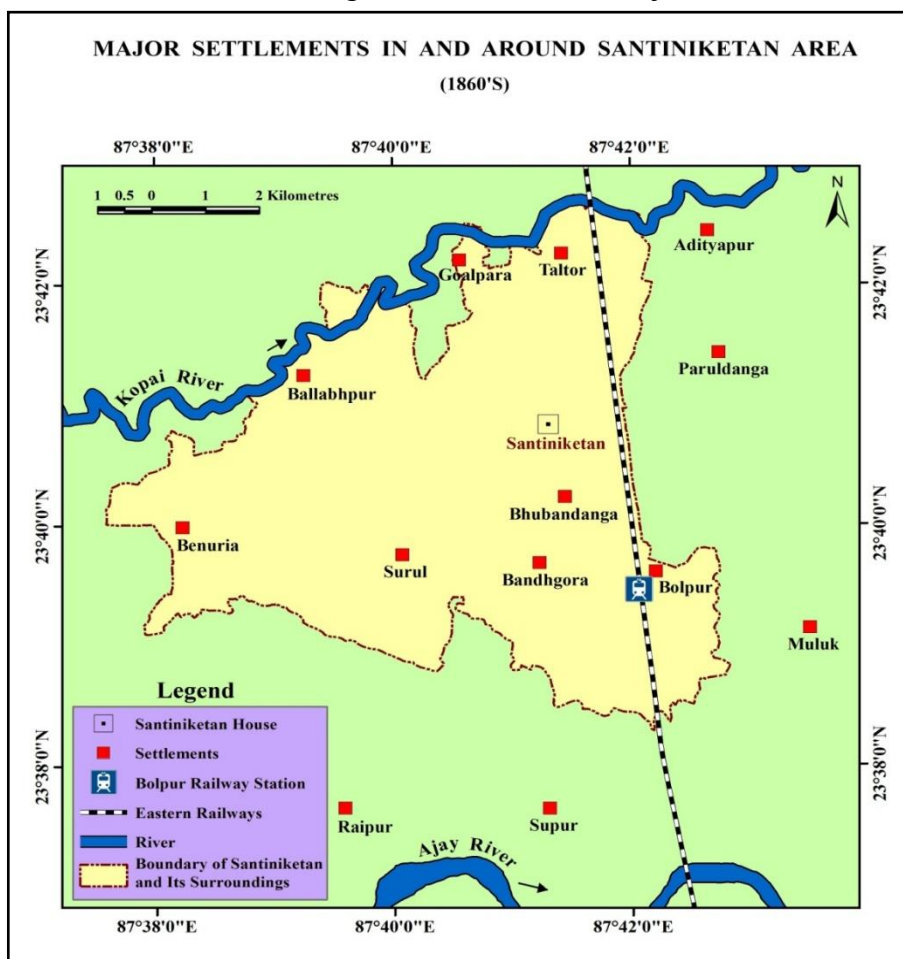
For trading of cloth and indigo, Chip kuthi was established in the village. There were 730 mud houses and 14 brick houses. Naw, Surul census village, being the largest rural settlement, comprised eight settlements in total.

**(iv) Benuria:**

Benuria has two distinct settlements - Benuria proper and Lohagarh. Benuria proper is further divided into two by a metalled road. On the south side, most Hindu households are closely located, with a cluster of the tribals on the west. Another settlement of tribals is located on the north of the main road and behind this is the larger settlement of Lohagarh, dominated by the Muslims who coexisted with few scheduled caste Hindu households (Som *et. al.*, 2010).

**(v) Adityapur:**

In the north east of Santiniketan, Adityapur was a primitive and historical village which had an important role for development of Santiniketan. Very highly educated, cultural persons lived in this village. There was the 'Kanchishwar' temple of lord Shiva.



**Figure-2: Major settlements in and around Santiniketan during 1860's**

(Source: Prepared by Researcher; based on literature information)

**(vi) Parul-danga:**

Agriculturally developed this village was situated in the east of Santiniketan. The beautiful sight of dense sal forest and gritty soil land beside the village road was a principal attraction to any kind of people, mainly the 'Gop' community people who lived there.

**(vii) Goalpara:**

In the north of Santiniketan, Goalpara was mainly the village of 'Gowala' (milkman). Lush green forest around the banks of Kopai river was the scenic beauty of this village. Milk, molasses from sap of date-palm etc. were the main production of the area.

**(viii) Ballabhpur:**

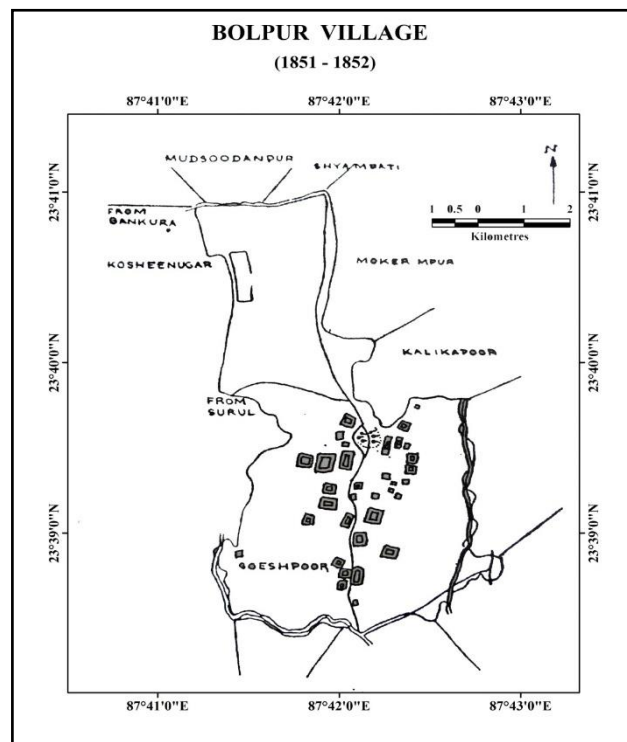
Besides having a traditional village settlement spread on both sides of the main road, Ballabhpur has four other smaller settlements located at the periphery. These are located far from the central village settlement at an average distance of approximately two kilometres. They are 'Khejur danga', 'Ballabhpur danga', 'Sarkar danga' and 'Khele danga'. While the non-tribals resided in Ballabhpur proper, the rest of the settlements are dominated by the tribals except for a few households of well-off scheduled castes such as the 'Saha's in Khejur danga (Soman, 2014).

**(ix) Sarpalehora:**

The village was full of dates and palm trees. Molasses from date-palm was made in the village with the help of co-operative endeavour. Well-versed persons in Sanskrit were the resource of the village.

**(x) Bolpur:**

After the connection of railways with this region, Bolpur village was developed. Therefore, it was the youngest village including 163 mud houses (see vide table-1). Settlement density at Bolpur village was 128 houses per sq. mile. About 150 years ago Bolpur was a small village under Supur porgana (see vide fig.3). But now it has become an international city.



**Figure-3: Bolpur village during 1851-52**

(Source: Captain Sherwill's Settlement Report, 1851-52)

**Table-1: Existing houses in and around Bolpur village in 1851**

Sl. No.	Name of the Villages	Number of Houses
1	Bolpur	163
2	Kalikapur	75
3	Bandhgora	79
4	Makarampur	15

(Source: Sherwill's Survey Report, 1851-52)

Apart from these, Srinidhipur, Ratanpur, Sripatipur, Kusho-danga, Bisheghata, Debanandapur, Sarbanandapur, Laldah etc. are villages within 4 km of Santiniketan in north east and some hamlet (at



present Balipara, Pearsonpally, Bondanga etc.) were developed in the area and its surroundings. There was no major settlement in Santiniketan area; after that in the north part of Bolpur mouza, Santiniketan was started after 1863.

## 8. Introduction and Growth of Settlement in Santiniketan since 1863:

In 1863, Santiniketan House (one-storied building) was first constructed by *Maharshi*. So, it is the starting point of settlement (see vide plate-1). Settlement pattern has also changed after 1863. There is a tendency to apply architectural techniques. Over-increasing time, no. of settlement has been increasing in Santiniketan area.

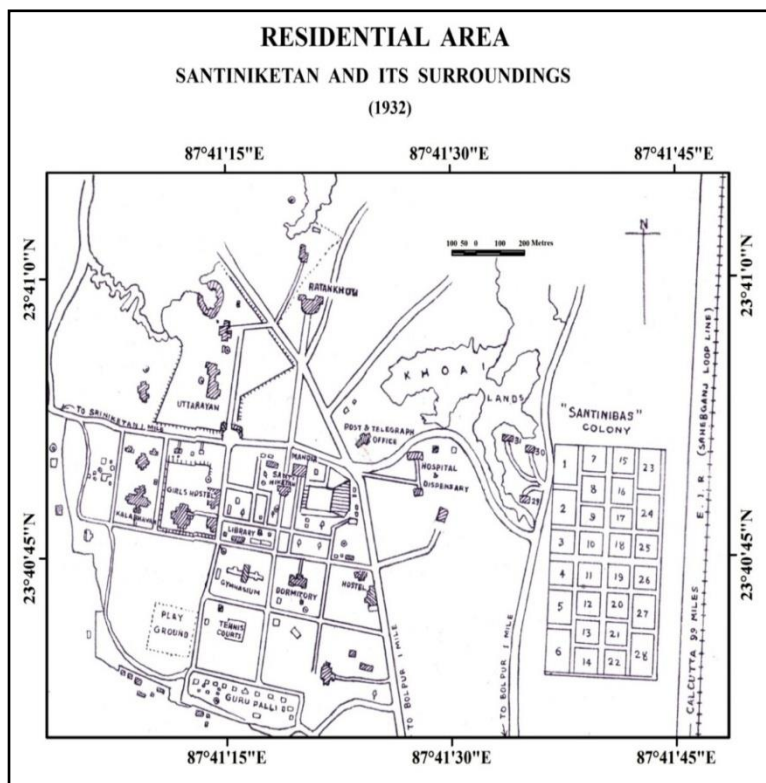
In about 1865 (after Santal Rebellion in 1855 A.D.), a small group of migrant Santal families from Santal Parganas settled down at Kuotala (present Pearson Pally) and its permanent habitation. After that 3 other Santal villages (Kaliganj, Balipara, Baganpara) are developed within a radius of half mile from Pearson Pally (Das, 2007).

Initiation of settlement expansion has started especially from Santiniketan core area. Around Santiniketan house there were also many houses built for teachers and students. Many of them were destroyed. They were 'Gairik', 'Sanskar Bhavana', 'Dwarik-bithika', 'Prak-kuthir'. The houses named as 'Dehali', 'Santoshalaya', 'Notun Bari', 'Benukunjo', 'Kalobari' etc. were still there (Das, 2013). In 1905, the Tagore family purchased land and settled in the area now known as *Nichu Bangla*. Within a few years after 1905, a cluster of houses (present Guru Pally) came up mainly for the teachers of *Brahmacharyashrama*. The settlement area of Santiniketan has sub-divided into some units- 'Pally', as for example- Guru-pally, Purba-pally and so on. In 1921, staff-quarters were constructed at Santiniketan for the increasing number of teachers and other employees of Visva-Bharati. In 1932, Visva-Bharati Society started leasing out land to its members about 2 *bighas* each to construct residential houses (Sinha, 1977).



**Plate-1: Santiniketan house in the old days (first construction)**

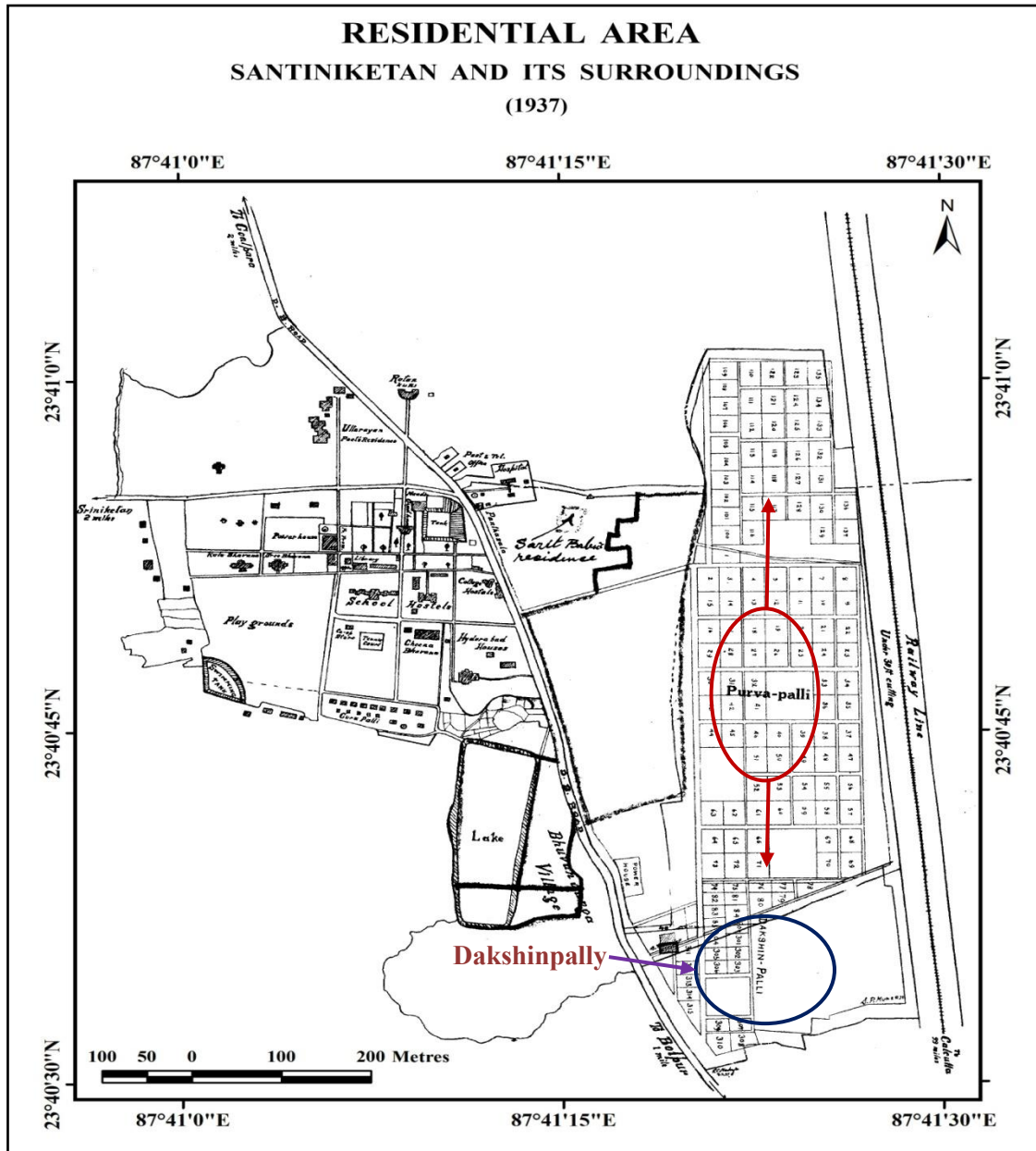
(Source: Rabindra Bhavana Archive)



**Figure-4: Residential area (*Santinibas* colony) beside Santiniketan *ashrama* in 1932**

(Source: Visva-Bharati Estate Office, 2013)

First residential colony of Santiniketan was 'SANTINIBAS'. The land plots (31 plots of which eight plots measure 3 bighas each, twenty plots measure 2 bighas each and three plots measure 4 bighas each) of this area have allotted as lease to members of Visva-Bharati for building purposes (see vide fig.4) (Visva-Bharati Bulletin- 17, 1932). This process had been started to destroy the Khoai area on the eastern side of Santiniketan Region as well. Later, 'Santinibas' Colony was renamed as Purbapally. Settlements expanded the name of Dakshinpally towards south of Purbapally after 1937 (see vide fig.5).



**Figure-5: Residential area (Dakshinpally, towards south of Purbapally) beside Santiniketan ashrama in 1937**

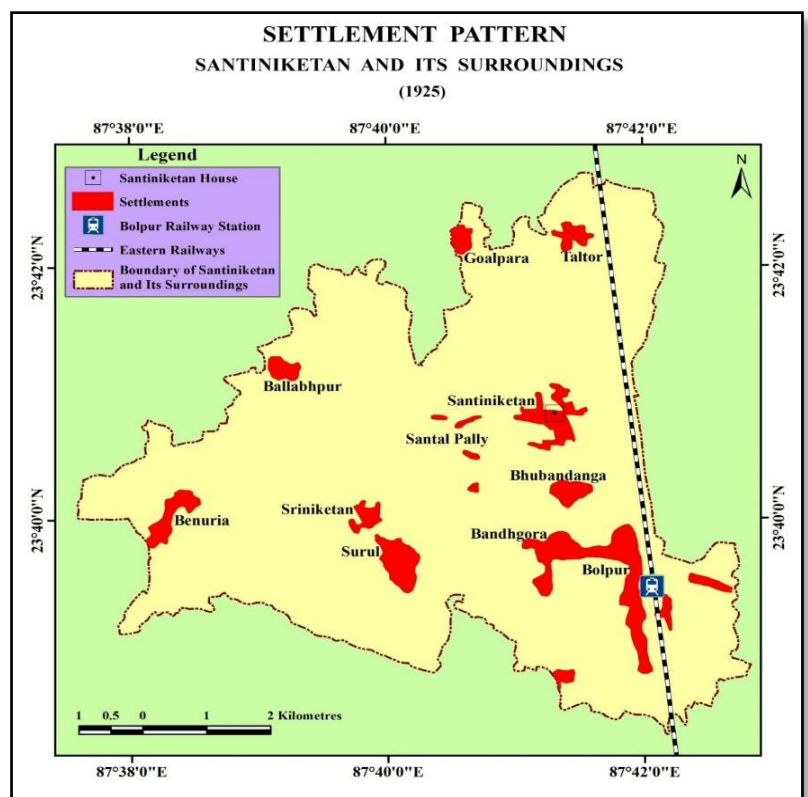
(Source: Visva-Bharati Estate Office, 2013)

During the Second World War, some peoples of Kolkata shifted their families to Santiniketan. From this time onwards, Santiniketan became a place of attraction for retired well-to-do Bengalis. Since 1951, when Visva-Bharati became a Central University, settlements have been growing gradually (Sinha, 1977). Now, there are different types of residential houses (own house, rented house, quarter etc.) and hostels (for boys and girls) in Santiniketan.

## 9. Settlement Growth and Its Present Scenario:

Each town has its own specificity or constraints determined by history, geography and economy. Planning strategies should focus on issues peculiar to each town regarding the identification of main constraints and the kind of development that is envisaged to overcome the constraints in the next 10 to 15 years. An urban spatial plan must define strategies for future urban development considering the economic, social and urban evolution and strategic alternatives related to infrastructure, transport, and energy management (Mukherjee, 1961). This is essentially in line with decentralization initiatives by the states to municipal bodies to carry out planning and management. In this case, Tagore said- *"I am never against progress, but when, for its sake, civilization is ready to sell its soul, then I choose to remain primitive in my material possessions, hoping to achieve my civilization in the realm of the spirit"* (Rabindranath Tagore, 'City and Village', 1924).

**9.1 Rural Setup:** Up to 1950 settlement pattern of this area was totally rural typed. Bolpur High School in 1904 (although actual year of establishment was 1868), Bolpur Girls' School in 1930, Bolpur Town Library and First Electricity in 1916, First Rice Mill in 1918, First Oil Mill in 1937, Bolpur Union Board in 1921 etc. had been influencing this area gradually (Mukhopadhyay, 1991) (see vide fig.6). After independence, the two colleges and four high schools were established. Apart from these, the important establishments are *Jambuni Bus-Stand*, *Super Market*, *Gitanjali Auditorium*, *Ramkrishna Mandir* etc. Super Market is situated on the Santiniketan Road with at least 100 shops. Very recently, some shopping complex, namely- *Rekha Shopping complexes*, *Netaji Bazar* etc. have been established. Several rice mills which once sped up urbanization in this area are at present reducing in number. At present, 11 Rice mills are found here (Roy, 2010).



**Figure-6: Settlement pattern of Santiniketan area in 1925**

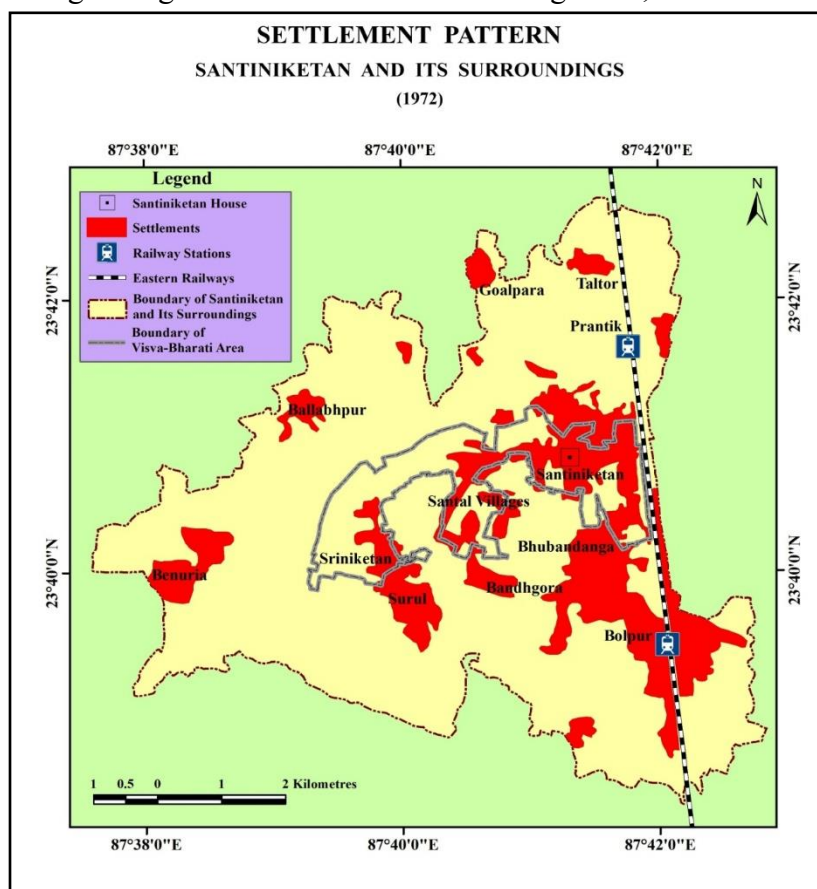
(Source: Prepared by researcher; based on Toposheet of 1925, from Visva-Bharati Estate Office)



**9.2 Urban Setup:** After 1950 to till now, most of the area is under urban setup.

### 9.2.1 1951A.D. – SSDA (1989):

Bolpur has been expanding rapidly, because of growing educational facilities. During 1950, there were 2 high schools, 20 primary schools, after that 7 high schools and so many English medium schools are growing on. For law and justice, Munsiff Court was established in 1871 at Bolpur, in 1972 as criminal court, in 1985 as Subdivisional Judicial Magistrate court. For health, a sub-divisional hospital was also established at Sian in 1986. Electricity was provided through Santiniketan diesel engine in 1916, Bhubandanga Power station in 1942, West Bengal State Electricity Board in 1955. In 1940, establishment of telephone exchange and microwave station in 1986 has started to give a new avenue for settlement growth in this region (see vide fig.7). This settlement expansion was due to major two events- i)



**Figure-7: Settlement pattern of Santiniketan area in 1972**

(Source: Prepared by researcher; from Toposheet- 73M/10 of 1972, Survey of India)

1951- Declaration of Visva-Bharati as a central university, ii) 1950- Declaration of Bolpur as a municipal town. Visva-Bharati Survey Report, 1977 reveals that after 1951, settlement growth has been increasing at a higher rate up to 30% in and around the Visva-Bharati area in between 1951 to 1961. Over the '50s, '60s and '70s many private houses had come up on the lands on which the residents now want to insulate from further construction activity, especially in the core area of Santiniketan. A few people wield influence locally wanting to decide what others should or should not do in the area (Sinha, 1977).

### 9.2.2 After SSDA (1989):

With the initiation of Sriniketan and Santiniketan Development Authority (SSDA) in 1989, the settlement expansion has been manifolded. SSDA has started modernization activities in this area by developing housing complexes. The landscape of Kopai and the land of Khoai is being destroyed by these development activities (Ray and Chakraborty, 2007).



**Plate-2: Expansion of settlement in Prantik Township**

(Source: [http://birbhum.nic.in/SSDA/ssda\\_home1\\_files/PRANTIK1.jpg](http://birbhum.nic.in/SSDA/ssda_home1_files/PRANTIK1.jpg))

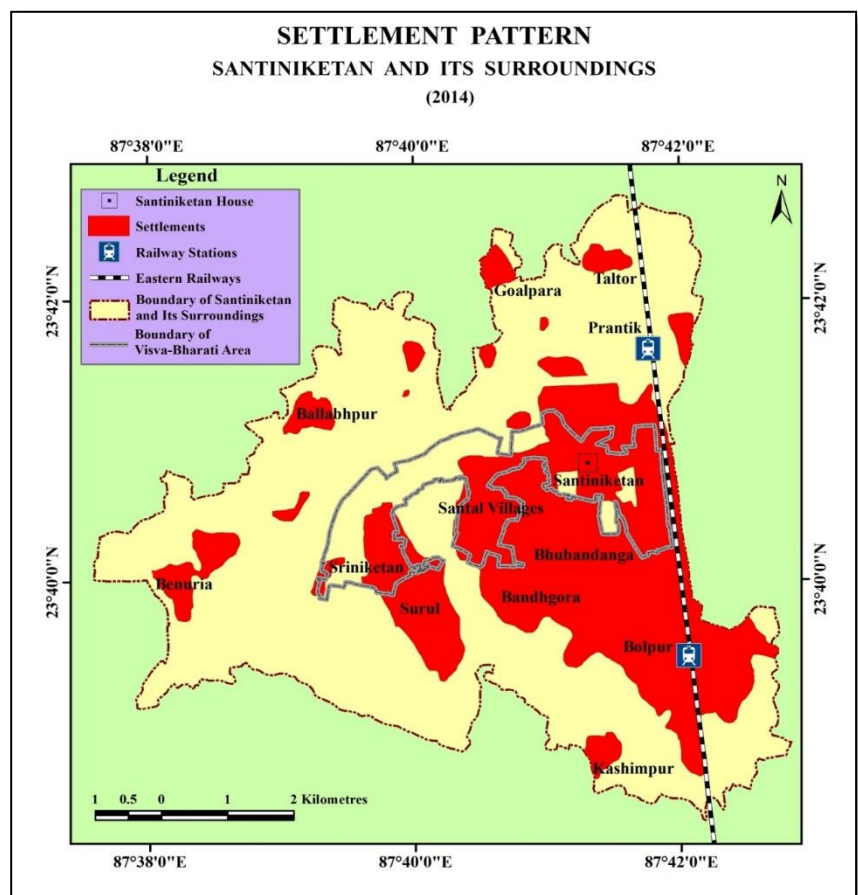
Economically, the high spending power of the university and of its students in aggregate may inflate the cost of living above that of the region. It is common for university employees to commute from surrounding areas, finding the cost of living in town too expensive. Prantik Township (named after the title of a group of poems written by Rabindranath Tagore) was inaugurated in December, 1994 and it was executed by Sriniketan Santiniketan Development Authority (SSDA). Township locality is spread over 57 acres of land of Taltor mouza of this Santiniketan region (Nandi, 2012) (see vide plate-2).

In the Santiniketan area, setting up a few buildings, putting in a lot of money and then having a complete picture of demoralization, degradation and inefficiency. As per a latest count, more than 50 real estate projects, comprising residential apartments, bungalows and hotels are coming up in a radius of 10 km in and around Santiniketan, and some 5-10 land deals are getting signed every month. The scores of leading real estate players along with mid-sized and small realtors from Kolkata are now camping in Bolpur. The town has long-root commercialized and now, developers have started buying old buildings there, to construct apartments. At present, some residential apartment projects are going on in Santiniketan and its surrounding area- Sobuj Potro, Sanchayita Villa, Bengal Amar Bari, Pantha Niwas, Bengal Amrochhaya, Deeshari Abosar, Rabikiran Apartment, Shanti Shristi, Amar Bari, Sonar Taree, Bengal Peerless Sonar Taree, Camellia Heritage, India Green Sobuj Potro etc. (Ray and Chakraborty, 2007).

Unplanned urbanization is robbing the town of its heritage. It is found that the water-bodies are now getting filled up and almost a fifth of the town's green cover has disappeared and that projects are not paying attention to drainage planning. Close to Kopai and Khoai, Goalpara and Ballabhpur have emerged as the critical places for land deals. Santiniketan has become a victim of money power. No one takes

any interest in preserving its heritage. Renowned novelist Mahasweta Devi has started a movement to stop this rampant urbanization, but she could achieve little (Mukherjee and Himatsingka, 2011). The map shows the present scenario of settlement pattern in Santiniketan and its surroundings (see vide fig.8).

There has been 5.25 times settlement growth in Santiniketan and Its Surroundings during the last three decades with the decline of vegetation, Agricultural and ecological (*Khoai*) area. Especially, during 1996-



**Figure-8: Settlement pattern of Santiniketan area in 2014**

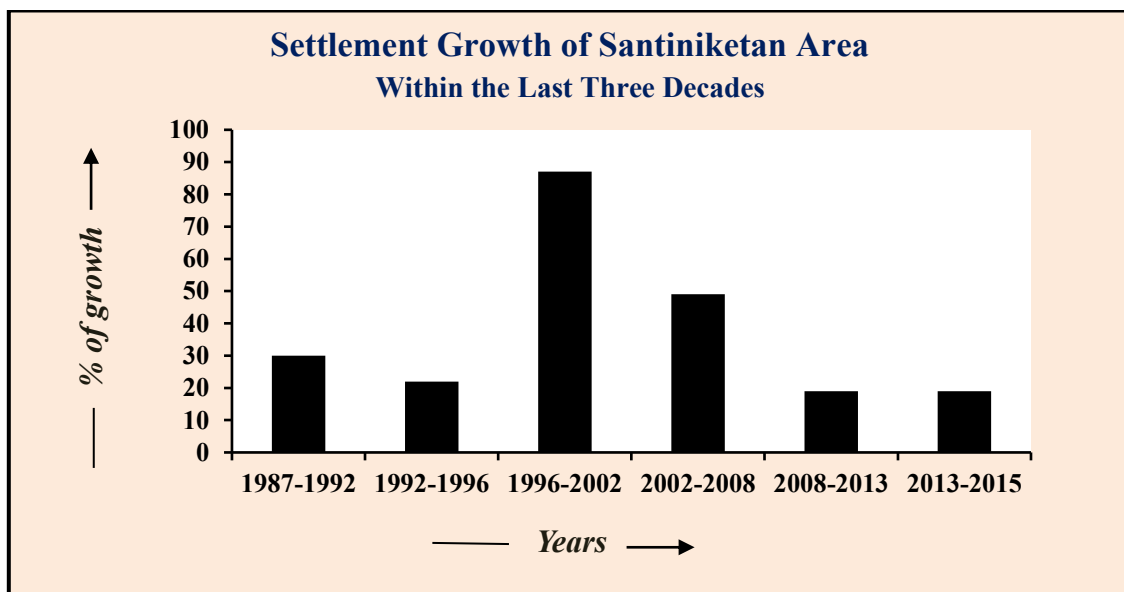
(Source: Prepared by researcher; from IRS LISS-IV Satellite Image, 2014; Google Earth, 2014)

2002, settlement expansion rate was high, due to the introduction of Prantik Township (see vide table-2 and fig.9).

**Table-2: Settlement growth in Santiniketan and its surroundings**

Time Period	% of Settlement Growth
1987-1992	30
1992-1996	22
1996-2002	87
2002-2008	49
2008-2013	19
2013-2015	19

(Source: Perspective Plan- Sriniketan Santiniketan Development Authority, 2015)



**Figure-9: Settlement growth of Santiniketan area within the last three decades**

(Source: Prepared by researcher; from Perspective Plan- Sriniketan Santiniketan Development Authority, 2015)

## 10. Conclusion:

Human settlement patterns are shaped by the dynamic intersection of cultural diversity and geographic limitations in the Kopai-Ajoy inter-riverine tract of the Bolpur-Sriniketan Block. The story of Santiniketan and its environs is one of remarkable change, from a lateritic, sparsely populated rural area to a semi-urban, culturally significant centre propelled by institutional, educational, and tourism-driven growth. According to this study, settlement growth in the area is not just physical or demographic; it is also closely linked to historical legacies, institutional influence, and socio-economic goals. Visva-Bharati Central University, Santiniketan's cultural appeal, and better transport have all contributed to the region's increased population density, quicker land use change, and boosted economic activity to expand the settlement sites. The process of peri-urbanization is being highlighted by the gradual absorption of peripheral communities into a larger urban continuum. Santiniketan's unique cultural and architectural character is threatened by unregulated construction and commercialization, especially considering its recent designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

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