

The Challenge of Intercultural Living

From the experience of a German in India

Essay by Martin Kämpchen

When I grew up in a small German town, there were only German boys and girls in our class. We had a common language, German, and a common culture. And yet, there were differences among us. I came from an educated background; my parents had both enjoyed higher education and were able to guide my studies with intelligent advice and help. Other pupils came from the background of farmers and craftsmen and office-goers. And there were Catholic and Protestant Christians in our class. During religious studies class we went to two different classrooms to take our lessons; during prayer, Catholics made the sign of the cross, the Protestants did not. But when we gossiped in between classes, when we played football or when we were hanging out in the places favoured by young people, these differences had no weight. Then other differences were more important – like who was a good sportsman and who was not; who had a girl-friend and who did not; who was able to dominate over others and who simply listened and obeyed; who read books and who did not care to read. So each one of us had shifting alliances according to the subjects taught, according to the places we visited and the people we talked to. As usual, there were frictions, but on the whole we lived together in harmony as one community. As I grew older, many of these shifting and spontaneous alliances crystallised and became more constant and defining.

As a teenager of 16 years, I went to the United States to study. I was a Senior in High School and lived with an American family. At school, I was the only non-American and the only person whose mother-tongue was not English. My host-family was not academic; the father was an insurance salesman. The entire family loved to watch TV which blared through the house all day. My American father questioned my need for privacy – I used to close the door of my room which is unusual in American homes. He wondered about my wish to write letters every day; my love for classical music was frowned upon. I was chided, and at one point even asked to leave. These differences were irreducible and continued as long as I lived in the USA. Obviously, I needed courage and self-confidence to accept such differences. All of a sudden harmony was no longer a matter which just happened. Harmony had to be consciously willed and established by a continuous effort. I began to understand that making a conscious effort to succeed in intercultural living, meant not to want *everything* I normally wanted, not to say *everything* I normally said, not to do *everything* I normally did.

Making intercultural living succeed meant, defined in negative terms, to be less open than I naturally was, to communicate less of myself than I normally would have. Defined in positive terms, however, it meant that I created the opportune conditions for *communication*.

Communication is the art of finding a public space in which genuine exchanges of data, of opinions, of convictions, also of protests and apologies are possible. Communication is the art of finding the right measure: the right measure in speaking and listening, in revealing and holding back of feelings, opinions and convictions. Communication demands a proper maturity of judgment to assess what the other person is capable of grasping and accepting intellectually and emotionally. Communication also demands a mature judgment to assess my own limitations in understanding.

Admittedly, I would not want to miss my experiences in America, including living with my insurance sales father and his high-strung wife. Returning to Germany, I realised that, compared with my class mates, I was well advanced in one vital area: communication skills. All other gains, like speaking English, like having walked through Chicago and Manhattan all by myself, like having been awarded the American High School Diploma, became insignificant compared to my self-confidence and success in communicating with others.

After returning to Germany, I was able to apply this skill with African students who arrived in my small German home town on the River Rhine. They were students of the Goethe-Institut which had been established a few years earlier. These young Africans needed to know the location of the local bank and the post-office, they wanted to know the addresses of German universities and of business companies; they wrote job applications, and I helped them. Observing how these strangers reacted to my social environment which I knew from birth, had a salubrious effect on me. In America, I had entered a milieu different from my own; I had learnt that my social conventions were not the only ones that exist. In my German home-town, Africans entered my sphere with their own strangeness of behaviour and thus questioned my behaviour pattern by their very presence. In both cases I experienced otherness, my own and that of unknown people, I learnt to appreciate the relativity of social norms.

The question that emerged in my mind was: *How much difference are people in any particular social environment able to accept and integrate?* My African visitors regularly arrived at mealtimes. My mother objected to this, while I was able to accommodate their unconventional behaviour. I got up from the family table to sit with my visitor and solve his problem. Afterwards, I continued to eat my food cold and alone. Again: How much difference are we willing to accept in others? This is a question I pose myself both whenever I enter

another environment as a stranger, and whenever somebody enters my own environment as a stranger.

Obviously, there is no ready-made reply to such a question. The reply will vary in any given circumstance keeping one overriding obligation in mind: I need to be able to communicate or allow communication to happen. And more than that: Communication needs to result in a situation of harmony. This may mean consent or dissent – but if dissent, then without any feelings or activities of aggressiveness. Once I am firmly fixed on this aim, I will be constantly sensitive to the question “How much difference are we able to accept?” I will strive, firstly, never to stretch my own “strangeness” too far, and, secondly, I will always keep in mind that at any time my role may shift from being at home to being a stranger. By not stretching my “strangeness” too far, I mean that while entering a strange environment I consciously or unconsciously adjust and change to a certain extent, even though my convictions and my need for comfort may not entirely agree with these adjustments and changes. I must present myself in such a way that others have the opportunity to understand and appreciate me.

Let me now enter India. In a way, I first visited India via Africa. My intense contact with African students enkindled the wish to visit West Africa after entering University. During my first semester I applied for a travel grant from a government-sponsored organisation. A group of German students prepared to visit Nigeria for three months, and I was one of them. A war broke out between two tribes, later called the Biafra War, and in a telephone call from Hamburg I was told that the Nigeria group had to be dissolved and its members to be distributed to groups aimed for other Third World countries. “Where do you want to go?” asked the voice in the telephone. Out of the blue I replied: “To India.” I prepared thoroughly and did visit India in 1971 for three months. After completing my University studies in Europe, I returned to India in 1973 and stayed on until today. For four years, I taught German in Kolkata; then I returned to University adding degrees from Madras University and Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan. There, I stayed on to translate poetry by Rabindranath Tagore and write on Tagore’s visits to Germany. But I also stayed on as I had, in my early years at Santiniketan, started a symbiotic relationship with two Santal tribal villages about eight kilometres away from Santiniketan: They are the villages Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati whose inhabitants were to change my life.

As soon as I started to live in Santiniketan, I began to learn Bengali. So far, in Kolkata and in Madras, I had communicated in English which was neither my mother-tongue, nor the

mother-tongue of my Bengali and Tamil interlocutors. As soon as I managed to utter a few words to Santiniketan riskshawallahs in their own language, this opened their hearts, and it opened the hearts of all the persons I talked to. I was no longer cheated by shop-keepers, I was helped and complimented and literally courted by all the simple people around me. I learnt that one important lesson of intercultural living: *Try to speak in the mother-tongue of the other person who originates from another culture*. Language is the key to understanding other persons in their entirety, in their wholeness. While my speaking skills improved, I gradually became able to express emotions: I could joke, and scold, and plead. I realised that as soon as I was able to meet Bengalis on an emotional level, rational differences of opinion and outlook mattered less and less

The ability to speak Bengali brought me into contact with villages around Santiniketan. Each afternoon I took out my cycle and moved around near-by villages, stopping to chat with farmers on the road or in the fields. It gave me great delight to enter into their lives through my Bengali conversations. However, I also became aware of the amazing cultural gap between the academic urbanised people of Santiniketan and the farming population in the villages just a few kilometres away. It pained me, and it continues to pain me, that the academicians of the University feel emotionally and culturally closer to their counterparts in Europe and America than to their countrymen a stone's throw away from their homes. Here I see a blatant indifference to the challenge of intercultural living on the part of educated people who could know better.

Does it not seem strange that I, as a foreigner from Europe, should be able to move deeper into the lives of Bengali and Santal villagers than most persons from the neighbouring town? I have often pondered why this is so. You may have your own observations about this phenomenon. My submission is this: Villages and towns in Bengal share the same political history and social structure. Upper class and lower class, educated and uneducated, upper caste and lower caste, “non-tribal” and “tribal” are distinctions which penetrate towns and villages alike. They are bound up in the same hierarchy of religious and social values. Hence people are forced to face the emotions attached to “upper” and “lower”. Villagers, especially tribal villagers, are considered “low” in all these different social value systems just mentioned. Bengali town's people are conscious of their social superiority, whereas people from outside that social hierarchy, namely Europeans and Americans, are able to see village people free from such biases as the people they really are.

This has its impact on me, as a European, as well. Whenever I meet educated people on the Indian subcontinent, I am being associated with all the knowledge and all the prejudices that

people have heard about Germans or Europeans. I am asked about Hitler (although I was born after the Second World War). I am assumed to be rich and consumerist. I am considered to be permissive, socially more sophisticated, widely travelled and so on. I am being associated with the colonial past of the subcontinent and the psychic wounds it created. I have had to fight off these categories all my life and beg to be seen as the person I really am.

In the villages, however, I *am* taken as the person I wish to be. Lack of education and lack of awareness of the world around have had that one welcome effect: Village people perceive me as an individual, without any baggage of preconceived ideas. Hence I am able to interact with them without the straightjacket of social conventions. Vice-versa, I am aware that village people have appreciated my own freedom from preconceived notions and social value-systems looking at them. I am convinced that such mutual directness of approach and appreciation of the individual have been the key to whatever success I have had in my work among the Santals in Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati.

Yet, moving deeply into the world of Santal village life, my intercultural living assumed a more complex nature. Conversing with Bengalis in Santiniketan or Kolkata, I have often caught myself saying “*We* Santals....” That is, my identification with the Santal community was total when speaking to members of that part of society which is conventionally indifferent to or ignorant about, and possibly even insensitive about the life of tribals. Yet vice-versa, Santals themselves would be unable to identify that closely with me. Uneducated as well as educated tribal people live in a closed social system regulated by clear-cut dos and don’ts. I am welcome to mix with them freely, eat with them, sleep next to them, and work with them. But I am not normally part of their religious ceremonies, I am forbidden to marry a Santal girl. Also, in their myths and songs, their closeness to nature as farmers, and in their family-life, they remain removed from me. In these matters, they do not open up towards me, nor am I able to move closer to them on my own.

On several occasions I have taken educated Santal men and women on trips outside India. We have visited Germany, Austria, and England to perform in schools and before various groups. On such occasions we were closely identified with each other, we travelled and worked together, and we all said “*We* do” and “*We* think...”. Again I was more a member of their Santal group than a member of the “other”, this time the European community before which we performed. Yet, as soon as we reached India again, Santiniketan again, that unity disintegrated naturally, and each one of the group became a member of his or her village, of his or her family again, and I was, as before, alone in Santiniketan.

In India, and no doubt in Bangladesh as well, individuals define themselves first and foremost as members of their family. If you come from a “good family” you will, by virtue of this fact, have a good start in life, even if your educational record is average. A “good family” by definition is a family with doctors or teachers or lawyers, a family with a record of public service, a family with freedom fighters or monks or with expatriates who made good in the West. Please observe, when you are introduced to a new person, you will invariably hear that his or her father or mother, uncle or aunt, brother or sister is this or that and has such-and-such position and has a wife or husband who is and does such-and-such... Family comes first, and its merits accrue to you as a family member as well. Once I overheard a discussion in an academic household in Santiniketan. For some reason the family’s highly gifted son had not done well in a particular examination at the University. His parents were distraught. But a family friend consoled them, saying: “Do not worry about your son. There are two hundred years of education supporting him! He is bound to do well.” Right he was; this young man has now a prestigious job in Kolkata.

It has been my disadvantage all along while living in India to have “no family”. I have no wife and no children, and nobody knows my father or my brother and their positions; and obviously I would not mention their names and merits when introducing myself, as they would mean nothing to the other person. Further, I have opted against employment because I wanted to live as a free-lance writer and translator. Hence, people cannot locate me within the hierarchy of society. The result was that for many years I have been treated as a student at Santiniketan, although I had two Ph.Ds and a dozen books against my name. Had I – in the spirit of intercultural living – wanted to truly integrate with Bengali society I would have had to marry and take up employment.

This disadvantage of having “no family” I, by the way, share with my educated Santal friends in Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati. As first-generation literates, they all come from a background of farmers which, in educated society, is, sadly, nothing to be particularly proud about. Once they do get a high level of education, helped and guided by well-wishers and by their own effort and will-power, they again need to struggle yet harder to consolidate their position in educated middle-class society. This struggle takes up so much of their energy that the question of giving back to society rarely arises. I am proud to say that within my circle of educated Santal friends, such careerist behaviour has been lacking. After studying and starting their own families, they have begun to look back and dedicate themselves to the uplift of their own Santal society. This meant sacrificing the prestige and the money of a career in government which had been open to all of them.

It is true, I was drawn to my Santals friends, among other reasons, because they – like me – lack a position within Bengal society. This was a strong common ground. Meanwhile, our educational experiments have become known and appreciated in Bengal, and my young Santal friends have attained respect and appreciation which they would never have as government teachers or bureaucrats. And ironically, my name is now being mentioned in Bengal more often as the “godfather” of the Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati experiment than as a writer and translator.

Yet, it is important to me to emphasise that to me as well as to my educated Santal friends, it has been an advantage to be “position-less” within Bengal society and to have to struggle for a place in that society. By having to struggle, they and I have attained to a genuine place, achieved by merit – not by family, achieved by sacrifice – not by position. There is a greater sense of satisfaction to be successful after such a struggle.

Intercultural living has not only been in the centre of my personal efforts in Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati. It has been a concept in my *development work* as well. What does the meeting of cultures have to do with the development of a Santal village? – one may ask. Is it not enough to try and develop a tribal village by providing modern education and modern skills, sanitation, medical assistance, agricultural innovation and the like? Why should intercultural activities be part of such a development effort? Here is my answer: For a Santal village the skills of intercultural living are vitally important once it wants to stretch its life beyond the village boundaries. Beyond the Santal village, there are Hindu and Muslim villages, there are the farmers our Santal men and women work for in their fields and households. From childhood, Santals learn to adjust to the hierarchies of caste, religion, and social habits imposed on them from outside. Intercultural living for them traditionally means dependence and subjection.

Groomed in a western country, I wanted to approach my Santal friends and village people in general in a strictly and consciously egalitarian manner. I refused all symbols and gestures of superiority. I wanted to meet them as individuals, to understand and appreciate their worth and their character as individuals. As I have no fixed place in society, as mentioned earlier, this approach was accepted with simplicity. I was accepted as I asked them to accept me. In other words, I too was accepted as an individual. Can intercultural living also become a positive, an empowering experience for Santal villagers? –Yes, indeed: through education!

I believe in the need for modern education. In the long run, tribal societies will not be able to bypass mainstream modern education if they want to survive materially as well as survive

with a tribal identity. The vital question here is: How is it possible that traditional tribal culture maintains its vitality while, at the same time, allowing modern education to take root? – My reply is: This is possible when we, thoughtfully and with full respect for their cultural identity, open various windows to the world for educated Santals. I suggest a three-pronged approach: (1) Introducing modern education; (2) making Santals aware of the wealth of their own culture; and (3) opening the wider world especially to village youth. Here I must bring in Rabindranath Tagore. He wanted a kind of education which is wide open to the beneficial influences of the entire world; he wanted to provide inspiration to his students – not memorised knowledge; he wanted teachers as model men and women – not disciplinarians; he wanted art, theatre, songs and dance to be part of education – his students should not just sit through one class after another. My third point, in fact, takes its clue from Rabindranath's wider vision.

From the beginning of my village work twenty-five years ago, I sent my Santal friends outside their villages to people and to places where they could receive a kind of knowledge and inspiration which they were unable to get in their own environment. They went to Kolkata and to Karnataka to observe what results non-formal education could achieve. They stayed with social workers and artists, in Hindu and Christian ashrams and in non-formal schools. These were carefully guided efforts to open the world. The world did not rush in on them and overwhelm or spoil them. Enriched from these experiences, I asked my friends to plow these experiences back into the practical work in their own villages. With each travel experience, their dedication to village work and to village life was refreshed. So far, not a single person left us to work in the places they had visited. These efforts continue. Many of my senior Santal friends have visited Europe, some of them three or four times. They have performed music and dance in schools and for various groups, they have held exhibitions and participated in lectures and seminars. Yet, they continue to work for their Santal community in the villages of Bengal.

The next step was to invite young people from outside the village to stay with us. Friends have come from Kolkata and from Dhaka, from Delhi and from South India, from Europe and America to stay with us. We have had young volunteers from Europe to live in Ghosaldanga or Bishnubati for one or two or three months. These volunteers are a living proof that an intercultural live together is not only possible, but it enriches both sides, the guests and the host community. Our guests produce an enormous amount of self-worth in the young teachers and social workers of our villages.

It has been my rule that the heads of the various departments are not answerable to me in their work. They are answerable to our village council and to their conscience. I do not believe in bureaucratic control, rather I want that the adult members of our team follow their conscience and use the inspiration they receive from our many guests.

The continuous exchange of our team of educated Santal village leaders with outside people has given them the confidence that their work is indeed important. The dialogue with Indian and foreign guests engages them in a thinking process about the means and aims of their work. In addition, it makes them capable of relating not only with the poor and uneducated persons of their village on the one hand, but on the other hand to explain their activities and their needs to our donors and benefactors in Europe as well. The correspondence and dialogue with our circle of friends in Germany and elsewhere has moved away from me into their hands. It rarely happens that grassroots-workers in the villages are able to communicate far beyond their cultural environment with foreign friends and donor agencies. With us, such intercultural breadth has become a matter of course.

Such globalisation through human exchange is being aided by the technical means of globalising communication. Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati were among the first villages in our area to get a telephone connection. We worked hard to get electricity into Ghosaldanga, especially so that our students could study with good light during the evenings. Next we bought a computer for our village correspondence. In the meantime, a cordless internet connection has been given to us. And a mobile telephone is already in the hands of most of our village workers. Hence, even while staying in our remote Santal villages, we are able to witness the life currents criss-crossing the globe far away from our villages. And meanwhile not so few of these life-currents already pass through our own villages and connect us with the world.