

Ideas and Method of Work of Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati

by Boro Baski

The work of Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati did not start in accordance to any pre-planned strategy or conventional development methods. The activities and the method of work developed gradually according to the needs and aspirations of the people. Keeping parity with the village life, tiles and tin houses are still the landmark of the organizational buildings. Santal life is moulded by various socio-cultural and religious intricacies. Only by addressing any one aspect of their lives will not improve their life. We therefore have taken a holistic approach, addressing the core aspects of their lives: socio-economic progress, health, education and culture. All the development initiatives have been as per the rhythm and tune of the villagers' capabilities and way of life. This has been a long and consistent approach as it has been experienced that a shift in attitudes from tradition to modernity is hard and can even take generations. A short-term and target-oriented approach, if not rightly channelized, might jeopardize the whole initiative.

Rabindranath Tagore observed while working on his Sriniketan experiment, that education often creates an unseen wall between literate and illiterate villagers. As a developing agency steps into a village with any development package, immediately the sense of 'Giver and Receiver' grows among the villagers. There hardly remains any sense of collaboration, of equality and even of dignity.

We at Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati have from the beginning tried to incorporate the traditional social administration of the Santal 'Manjhi Pargana' which has been nurturing our community for centuries. The Managing Committees of our organization imitate that structure. The "Manjhi Haram", the traditional community leader, always holds the post of the 'President' of the organization, and other members of the "Manjhi Pargana" also get a position in the Managing Committees. Though our Santal society is egalitarian, power struggles do exist. Thus the duties and responsibilities of the organization and the Manjhi Pargana have been clearly distinguished. The Manjhi Pargana performs the traditional duties like managing the traditional rituals and festivals. They are responsible for solving personal and family and inter-village issues. The Managing Committees on

the other hand take up developmental and innovative issues like education, health, income generation programmes and cultural presentations. Snatching traditional powers and respect from the Manjhi Pargana is the common mistake that political cadres or development agencies make while working among tribes. By doing so, they practically destabilize the tribal foundation of strength from inside. The consequences of breaking down their traditional system often become dangerous.

Education is the main programme of our organization. The educational problems of Santals are multi fold. Beside the main issues of language and culture, there are also obstacles concerning the usual curriculum, the method of teaching, the process of evaluation etc. Addressing these issues we have a three-tier system of education.

First, traditionally education is said to start in the Balwardi centres at the age of three years. But, the process of education starts when the child is in its mother's womb. The health worker starts educating the parents so they will give nutritious food to their future children, will immunize then etc. When the child is born the health worker regularly keeps contact with the parents. When the baby is three years, parents bring them to Balwari Centre where they learn the habits of going to kindergarten and school, of cleanliness, they learn songs, rhymes, games etc and all of these happens in Santali.

The second stage starts when the children reach 5 years and are admitted in our Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram (RSV), a Non-formal Santal Primary School. At RSV, Santali language is used in the initial years of their schooling before they move into Bengali medium. Several Santali Primers have been published from our school to make the transitions from Santali to Bengali easy. The syllabus of the school has also been formed to fit into the socio-cultural lives of Santal children, but still keeping in mind the main-stream school syllabus. There are also evening schools which guide the primary school children. Our senior students help them in their studies.

The third step is the hostel and the coaching centres for high school students. There are three such centers which now run by our organization in the two villages and one at RSV Campus. The hostel has limited seats giving preference to bright students and to students of difficult family backgrounds.

The main objectives of the hostel are to mould students with a balanced view towards life. The students should be academically good. But they should also learn

compassion towards other living beings and take an interest in their culture. They will later set an example to their fellow people. Such models are so badly needed in the Santal community. Those who cannot be accommodated in the hostel are admitted to the coaching centres of the villages. The objective is to provide them extra coaching and guidance to fit into the main stream government high schools. Besides providing educational help to the students, they are also exposed to the positive strengths of their Santal life, like importance of the 'Manjhi Pargana'-system, their sense of community, their joyful live-style.

We have also groomed Santali dance-, drama- and music-groups by the educated youths who have traveled to various parts of India like Kolkata, Delhi, Bangalore, Kerala and abroad to Germany, England, Austria, and Bangladesh to share our lives and culture with the outside world. Traveling in India, our students are consciously exposed to the glittering and competitive live-styles, as well as to slums and road-side plight of our cities. These exposures help them to make a choice in their lives.

Mere education does not help one much in this beautiful world unless one has a sources of earning. Otherwise we are only adding more unemployed educated youths in the already overcrowded unemployment wagon. Therefore, in 2001 with the support of a German organization 'Agape', Heidelberg, we have started a 'Vocational Training Center' (VTC) at Bishnubati. Here, youths are given training on various income generation programmes like agriculture, rearing of goats, hens, ducks, making of shoulder bags with Monipuri loom, batik, ornaments with low cost-no cost materials. After training educated youths are also supported to start small enterprises like grocery shop, a cycle repairing shop, a mobile phone repair shop. Women are also supported to start goatery, poultry at home in traditional way to which they are used to. All these small and individual initiatives bring extra income to their families.

We also support those who are interested in the professions which need training elsewhere. Several of such cases have been referred to the Training Centres of Lok Siksha Parishad of the Ramakrishna Mission, Narendrapur, Kolkata. Coming back from the training some of them are leading their lives comfortably by driving an auto rikshaw, a taxi and running a tailoring shop. However, the shift from a happy-go-lucky life to a business-minded life is slow among the villagers.

Health programmes were started from the sense of societal responsibility and fellow feelings. Giving first aid treatment, taking patients to hospital and giving moral support to the families were the main activities in the beginning. For a few years, Dr. Debaprasad Bhattacharya from Kolkata and a number of doctors from Santiniketan and Bolpur used to come to treat the patients once or twice a month and this continued quite for some time. But, the actual momentum of the health services started when Dr. Monika Golembiewski, a German child-specialist began to visit the village on a regular basis. Though her main thrust is mother-and-child-care, she also takes up emergency and serious medical cases. With the help of Dr. Monika we have treated dozens of critical surgical cases in the last fifteen years. At present there are three health workers, a homeopathic and an allopathic doctor who treat our patients once a week in our village dispensary. Health services are provided in several parts: (a) Primary health check up through our health workers; (b) Health Awareness Training to villagers especially to mothers who are taught healthy child rearing, what is nutritious food, basic health and hygiene; (c) Building of Community latrines and bathroom and (d) Nutritious food: After doing a thorough health-checkup the malnourished children are identified and provided with nutritious food till they become medically fit. At present, people from six neighboring villagers are directly being benefited from our health programme. In 2011, Dr. Monika started a new hospital “Shinning Eyes” at Makrampur near Bolpur town which is 10 kilometers from the village. The hospital is dedicated to poor children and their mothers from our villages.

When we evaluate our achievements after 25 years of work among Santals , must talk of both positive results and disappointments. The positive results are that we have become conscious of our problems around us and try to solve them ourselves. We have developed a network with a large number of individuals and agencies who support us financially and logistically to go forward in our mission. Our benefactors and donor agencies and advisors are too many to mention here. But especially the “Friends of Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati” in Germany should be mentioned. It provides practically all the funds for our work; it have been a great boon for us. We would not have persevered the way we have if Mrs. Marianne Pal Chowdhury and her team of Frankfurt were not beside us for such a long time.

The disappointments are: We have been too slow in addressing the issues. As one of my friends remarked: ‘We deal with issues like customs, culture, rituals which are nothing but issues of the past. But we are ignoring the rapid changes happening around us.’ We humbly agree that we are running behind the time and so do all our fellow villagers. But, we also reiterate our organization’s principle to dedicate ourselves to the people who are left behind in this rat race of modern development. The development initiative of Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati is not only the concern of the little educated villagers, but it is a concern for us educated Santals, too. who are constantly facing new challenges and trying to solve them with creative and practical solutions. This is like a journey in which we all are jointly participating and which should lead towards the betterment of our lives and our society.