

## Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati – Torchbearers of Rabindranath’s ideas?

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I have since sometime been pondering over the question of how communities become extinct? Are human communities comparable to say, dodos, dinosaurs and the hundred of animal and plant species that daily fatten the list of ‘extincts’? I do not know what the right answer could be though I do admit that I have worked out a solution to this conundrum to my logical satisfaction if I may be presumptuous. Communities become extinct by losing their languages, dialects, scripts (if any), cultural products, livelihood and their ecological niches or habitats. At an intangible level, loss of faith, belief, philosophy and attitudes towards rites of life cycle lead to extinction of communities. When communities perceive and recall their collective loss and put in place some institutional systems as safeguards there is an opportunity for shared commonalities to endure. After all it is these shared commonalities that forge community sentiments and feeling that give the necessary impetus to withstand the cross currents of other societies and cultures especially those that would otherwise engulf them. Communities then would not become extinct or function with dysfunctional identities.

Now I raise another issue and its corollary. Can communities continue to exist without changing or being untouched? Given the inevitability of change, the obvious answer is a straight negative but when we analyse the nature, pace, sustenance and quality of change we need to seek answers at complex levels. Also, consider the fact that most communities do not live in isolation; they are neighbours of each other and interact with each other in various sectors like economy, education, polity and in regional culture though the interactions in social life is noticeably less. Thus culture contact of communities is another important factor that we have to consider. Both in the case of change and the contact with other cultures, the experience of each community may be different or graded from rough to smooth/ easy to hard/ undefined to defined or pleasant to traumatic. A community that finds itself on surer ground in terms of its own cultural values and is perceived by other communities to be on par, encounters change and culture contact with some amount of advantage while a community that has been encapsulated/isolated for a long period of its history and is perceived not quite on par, experience change with in-built handicaps/disadvantages. Where would we place in the Santals vis-à-vis the other neighbouring communities in this region? The reason for my going into all this in some detail is to enunciate to ourselves the special position of the Santals in this region – this small minority community is in a vulnerable condition in terms of its sustenance of many of its cultural markers and strengths. We are probably witnessing a ‘community in transition’ and it is essential to look for corrective measures if possible. Adjusting in plural situations, any community needs skills and attitudes that foster cross-cultural encounters. The loss of culture of any community is a loss for mankind.

What were the ideas of Tagore when he started his work of rural uplift also known as the Sriniketan Experiments in Rural Reconstruction? Rabindranath did not work with the Santals in particular but with rural communities in general and in the course of his work and life he demonstrated an intuitive sensitivity to the different kinds of cultural and social experiences when communities encounter change and culture contact that he saw from the divides between rural vs. urban/uneducated vs. the educated created through the consolidation of urban centres and their ways of life. Urban institutions created by the Colonists could be expected to serve the purpose of the entrenchment of the colony! The moribund state of cultural life in villages made him say over and over again about how the lifeblood that used to once nurture the whole country was drying up and was not being replenished as the villages were dying and urban centres were ‘progressing’ at the cost of the once vibrant rural life. Again and again he highlighted the growing distance between the educated urban elite and rural people as if the people had become alienated from their own - rural people were subject to a double rejection – from the British as well as their own countrymen who had been recently ‘bred’ in colonial systems and for who age-old traditions were not of much consequence. Has the picture really altered today? Have our attitudes towards our own fellow citizens undergone a qualitative change? Even at the cost of sounding clichéd, have we not, put the burden of nation building on shoulders of people who have not been empowered or equipped so as to negotiate the rush of modernity without being swept off their feet?

Rabindranath and his associates, principal among who were Elmhirst, Kalimohan Ghosh and many others started work in a few villages around what is today Sriniketan. Some of the work was the general cleaning of the village through clearing undergrowth, digging drains, cleaning water bodies in which the villagers participated with labour and involvement. These were the means by which the trust of the villagers through direct action was gained and the setting for meaningful interactions to be started and sustained. The helplessness of the villagers when faced with lack of medical facilities, lack of education, crop failure, menace of money lenders and other such maladies were some of the areas of intervention. Plans for rejuvenation of rural crafts and artisans were made in Sriniketan – utilizing the skills of local artisans with training in design and creating a market for the goods so produced became a successful model and turned Sriniketan into a hiving cottage industry. In the workshop worked the local artisans side by side with the boys who were learning the craft in a spirit of give and take. On the agricultural front there were many measures that were adopted. The account will not be complete unless I mention that Tagore designed and created many festivals and functions around the activities of Rural Reconstruction adding a celebratory dimension to human labour. It was not mere ‘dignity of labour’ but central position of human labour in the advancement of human civilization.

I locate the activities of Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati within this matrix as there are many dimensions in common with Rabindranath’s Sriniketan experiment. It is not easy to sustain programmes and activities consistently over a long period of time. Following Tagore’s ideas, the

work in the two Santal villages is focused on creating communities of like-minded people. In many ways, all of the above informs the work undertaken in Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati – the work that started as a dialogue between Sona Murmu of Ghosaldanga and Martin Kaempchen from Germany a quarter of a century ago. The dialogues were and are premised on debate, discussion and questioning – the instruments of intellect, with a view to arrive at mutually accepted and agreed upon means of action. I shall highlight in brief the nature of the work done in the two villages. The emphasis on Santal culture as a viable and preferred mode of shaping the world view is palpable in all the programmes undertaken – there are two objectives, one, the perpetuation of Santal culture and two, to contribute to its growth, cultivation and transcendence. The importance of Santal language as the language of primary education with the objectives of making the transition from home to the world smooth and generating and sustaining interest in academic activities and acquiring knowledge from secondary sources. Generating self-employment by entrepreneurship training in keeping with the available skills and traditional economic practices of the Santals like animal rearing; farming; crafts; etc. with emphasis on the participation of women. It is expected that with increasing education and participation, Santals will be able to explore other domains of the mainstream with preparedness. One of the most important ways in which the intangible aspects of Santal way of life is supported is through regular ‘mela’s and community gatherings of Santals of other villages during which competitions of Santal dance, music, games, plays are arranged. The objective here has been the broadening of the base of the community and to create solidarity through we-feeling. This also prevents the consolidation of only the local and immediate identity. Regular trips to the outside world are another aspect of the work being done here in the two villages, once again, with a view to expose to cross currents in the wider world. The Friends of Ghosaldanga in Germany has developed into a vibrant exchange of ideas, resources and attitudes.

I take this opportunity to express how enriching the experience of being part of this experiment has been and that I am grateful for being a co-passenger on this journey. Thank you.