

[12th February 2012-Santiniketan: GASS 25]

Ghosaldanga Adibasi Seva Sangha – Did it make a difference?

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Speaking of my Ghosaldanga experience, I have to begin with a personal story. I arrived at Santiniketan as a student to do a Ph.D. at the Department of Philosophy and Religion. On the very first day of my stay, that was in late December 1979, I was accepted by Professor Kalidas Bhattacharya, the renowned philosopher, as his student. I lived alone in the outhouse of the erstwhile United Nations diplomat, Dr. Moni Moulik, in Purva Palli. I almost immediately began to learn Bengali as systematically as possible. In the afternoons I took out my bicycle and roamed around in the countryside which then, thirty years ago, was much less crowded by buildings and people than it is now. I had already taken a deep liking to Bengal village life during earlier visits to the village home of Jaykrishna Kayal in South 24-Parganas and a visit to Kamarpukur and Jayrambati.

From time to time my room at Purva Palli was visited by a Baul singer who lived at Bautijal, a village some ten km away from Santiniketan. Over a year or two we became friendly and I helped him to buy a plot at a short distance from his village on which he built a mud hut for himself and his family. This plot was at the edge of Ghosaldanga. When I visited him at his new home, I quite naturally got to know the entire Ghosaldanga population gradually. I loved to sit with them in the evenings, enjoyed to observe their rural life and learn about an aspect of Indian life which had been concealed from me although I had already spent nearly a decade in India.

I tell you this in order to stress that I did not enter Ghosaldanga with the intention of doing social work or research. I visited the village from curiosity, to understand India, to understand human life. I had, even while a student, experimented with and begun a life of fervent simplicity. For example, I never learnt driving a car which is unheard of in Germany. Until today I ride a cycle and do so happily. So when I observed and, to some extent participated in, the life of Ghosaldanga I realized how organically their

life blended with the felicity – and the rigours – of nature, and I began to understand how closely related a simple life is with a life in nature.

My focus shifted as soon as I met Sona Murmu who had been a student at Bergram School, staying in its hostel, and returned after completing his School Final. He was the only educated person at Ghosaldanga, and we began a friendship, spending many evenings together in his village home, along with his five brothers and his parents. Sona taught me many aspects of village life which, by mere observation, I could not have fathomed. Sona wanted to continue his studies at Bolpur College. Typically, his father was against it, advising his son that he had enough education and should now look after the family's fields. Sona resisted. I enabled him to attend College, and in return, I suggested that he open an evening tuition school for the Ghosaldanga school-children. None of them had progressed beyond class one or two. Running a small evening school needed hardly any financial investment, anybody could do it. But it required supervision and interest in the progress of the children. It was important to call the children from their huts day after day and if necessary lead them to the village square where they sat on a piece of sack-cloth and studied in the dim light of a hurricane lamp.

With Sona we had a *village youth-leader* in the making. Education is the most urgent requirement for modern-time leadership, as illiteracy, as I was soon to find out, puts youths and adults at a severe disadvantage on all levels of being. Therefore, prudence and feelings of friendship demanded that I fostered Sona's educational progress; while trying to draw out his talents as a youth leader. Initially it was my duty to oversee that Sona was regular and disciplined. For him, as well as for Boro Baski, the youth leader in Bishnubati, a neighbouring Santal village, it was a challenge demanding enormous mental sacrifice, to commit themselves to a long-term, day-to-day responsibility. In the early years, work broke down while I stayed in Germany during May and June.

In these early years I realized that some of the causes of material poverty are ingrained in certain attitudes and in a rigid mentality. I began to understand that poverty is not merely a lack of material goods, but it is also a mental attitude, a lack of

creativity and flexibility, a lack of positive energy and will-power; it is the inability to plan ahead, to organize oneself, to take risks exploring new ways of alleviating one's material privation. I began to understand what enormous effort it takes for a village person to emerge out of a life-style which is content with life as it was spent by parents and grand-parents. I understand what enormous effort it takes to stimulate a certain sense of urgency for change. And the only way to offer such a change seemed to be education, *long-term* education.

The principles by which I was guided are not based on text-books and theories, but on experience, both positive and negative experience, and on the learning process that we – as a group – have gone through. The first principle was that after identifying the two youth leaders, Sona and Boro, I would support them to follow their studies, to get trained and have the necessary experience, for example through travel, to draw out their potential and empower them for guiding their own village. Other young men, especially Sanyasi Lohar of Bishnubati and Gokul Hansda of Dhansara, joined the same process very early on. I saw it as my duty to watch over their personal pursuit of happiness and at the same time to give them the expertise and also limited funds to work among their village people. In the first two decades I visited these villages regularly, about twice a week; I arrived in the afternoon, stayed overnight and returned to Santiniketan the next morning.

Thereafter I began to retreat because I felt my duty to them was over once they could manage village development work responsibly on their own. This follows the old adage “Help for Self-help” which is, however, so difficult to follow. I told my friends again and again that my obligation is to make myself redundant; that they did not work to please me, but to serve their own village people. I never lead from the front in any function or event; rather, I do prepare the event or programme with my friends, but then I urge them to represent the village and experience the ownership of their work and of human responsibility.

Development of such kind may be painfully slow, but it is solid, it is sustained development. In the 1980s when I began to visit Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati, I calculated that my guiding presence was needed for five years. I gradually increased

the span, and after 25 years, that is, after one generation, I have finally understood that the second educated generation, that is, the children of the young men I began to work with, will bring change to fruition. So we emphasized *long-term programmes*, rather than short-term projects, as many NGOs do. We emphasize what Swami Vivekananda called “man-making” development, or building up human resources through education and responsible guidance. When you visit Ghosaldanga, Bishnubati and the Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram you will not see impressive buildings, but scores of girls and boys at their studies.

While my guidance may be needed for some more time, all decisions, including the most important and crucial responsibility, namely to manage funds and decide on salaries, are being taken by the various committees which we have instituted – the Ghosaldanga Bishnubati Adibasi Trust, the Finance Committee (comprising three senior educated members of our village organizations, and two from outside – Snehadri Chakraborti and myself); then there is the village Council and the Managing Committees of Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati. Hence, there is a whole structure which has slowly emerged which sees to it that there is a great deal of debate right from the top down to the base, namely the uneducated village farmer. Debate, as we all know, generates responsibility and participatory activity.

In the beginning, I concentrated on three areas which needed hardly any funds: the evening schools I mentioned, then afforestation and medical help. I considered the planting of trees, apart from its ecological merits, as a good training ground for discipline and community work. It costs next to nothing to plant trees, but it requires the discipline of a whole group to execute the work step by step over several months. This we did for more than a decade.

Finally, medical help was a primary aim because I realized that in order to attract the villagers’ interest in a holistic development, we could not abandon them to their own helplessness in the hour of crisis. Medical services, along with a kindergarten with noon meals, nutrition programmes, care for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers have taken an important place. Doctors who, as we know, prefer to avoid serving the village population, have been visiting Ghosaldanga from Kolkata, later from

Santiniketan and Bolpur regularly since two decades. A German child specialist visits us regularly since over 15 years. It is scary to realize how much of malnutrition and disease caused by the lack of hygiene and body care and lack of proper social habits are rampant right in the shadow of Rabindranath's Visva-Bharati.

As soon as Sona Murmu, Boro Baski and Gokul Hansda had completed their studies, they decided to sacrifice *cākri* (employment) and dedicate themselves full-time to village development. Only gradually I comprehended the enormous grip employment has on the mind of people. So sacrificing employment was a big step in the career of these young men and women. With this decision a process of *formalization* began, as we could now suppose that our work would assume some degree of permanence and not be just the passing fancy of a few young idealists.

Two registered societies, one in Ghosaldanga and another in Bishnubati, were founded. Simultaneously, I began to get the assistance of Dr. Mandarsh Mitra in Germany, as my own funds and occasional private donations from home no longer sufficed. As a consequence, the permission to receive foreign funds was sought from the Indian Government and granted. Finally, we founded a Trust to assure the financial security of our, now about 30, employees. In Germany, a circle of friends came together, lead by Mrs Marianne and Mr. Pal Chowdhury who founded a registered society in Frankfurt to give us financial and practical support. They visit us every winter.

All this moved us towards a formalization of our work, it became less personalized and spontaneous. Accounts had to be maintained and numerous official dealings instituted. In the beginning, it was the Lokasiksa Parishad of the Ramakrishna Mission, Narendrapur, which accepted our newly founded registered society as an affiliated member and gave us some kind of official status or identity. This was more important to my co-workers than to me. In the first decade, Sona's salary was drawn from the Narendrapur office so that he felt secure and could feel the prestige attached to his *sevā* work.

Later on the checks and controls that keep together any normal NGO were gradually introduced by my senior friends as well. After having worked for about twenty years,

these young men and women, then in their late thirties or early forties, typically went through a midlife-crisis wondering where they stood vis-à-vis their former classmates and contemporaries. They had seen other NGOs, their structures and trappings, they had seen the organization of their offices and the symbols of their functioning from which they derived prestige. Some of all that also entered into our work; and a few co-workers also left to accept government jobs.

I had to accept these changes, some of them with sadness. I had associated the original familiarity and spontaneity of functioning with the spirit in which Rabindranath had executed his rural schemes. On the other hand, our organizations had grown larger, entering several other Santal and non-Santal villages. I realized that with about 30 employees – teachers, cooks, hostel-wardens, night-watchmen and others – such easy familiarity was detrimental to the efficiency of the staff. A similar process had, probably, set in with Visva-Bharati as soon as it became a full-fledged University. I had never wanted the work to grow beyond these two villages. But once a whole group of young people shared the work with me, it took on its own dynamics.

Along with this process of formalization a second process began. Many of my senior friends, the first-line leadership, have become *socially mobile*. Their parents have been illiterate farmers and farmers' wives. Due to their education, they were able to take on their leadership role in the villages. With their salary and prestige, the seniors have moved into the lower middle-class bracket and with it into the mindset of middle-class respectability and the felt need to display the symbols of the middle-class. This social shift creates mental conflicts within themselves, and conflicts between their original social class and the colleagues of their present social status. I could offer very little help to assuage these conflicts.

I should add, that the salary that the senior employees draw is much less than what a government job would fetch them. There are compensations, of course. Their freedom is much greater, they can largely set their own rules and implement their own ideas, many have travelled far and wide in India and some even in Europe, they have the opportunity to meet many persons from outside our villages, from outside West-Bengal and India. The prestige and attention they receive is not negligible.

A third, possibly even more momentous, psychologically strenuous social change has been from the farmer class to the class of workmen and small-time businessmen. Not all young men who have done their class 10 exams are fit for entering College. Hence they should learn a trade or craft or a professional skill in the nearby towns. We have had weavers, tailors, shopkeepers, artisans, drivers emerging from this process, and we try hard to settle them with a suitable income. But I realized that it is a veritable quantum-leap in mentality to move from a farmer who relies on his fields for sustenance to these commercial and competitive jobs.

From the beginning, one important area of our work has been nurturing *Santal culture*. All of our pioneer members feel deeply motivated to preserve, activate and enjoy, propagate and develop Santal tribal culture, especially its dances and songs. Therefore, all the many, many festivals we have organized in Ghosaldanga, Bishnubati and at the RSV school have had that end in mind. Several of us have become veritable experts whose knowledge and experience are sought after in the state. Called by different organizations, cultural groups from our villages have had the opportunity to perform in various cities in West-Bengal, in North and South India, in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and England.

I have been a witness of how many educated Santals wrestle with finding their identity within mainstream Bengali culture. Should they become Westernised, or Bengalised or else discover their value system in Santal culture? Or can a discerning combination of all these become a base for a dignified existence? This has been the subject of intense discussions. Boro has become a writer over this question. Sanyasi Lohar, though not a Santal himself but spending his life in a Santal village, Bishnubati, has developed naïve Santali designs into a sophisticated art-form. Moving outside the Santal villages to present Santal culture without doubt lead to a strengthening of Santal identity and a feeling of self-worth.

I had the idea that such feeling of self-worth can be strengthened not by keeping Santals isolated, by wanting to protect them from outside influences, but on the contrary by guiding them into a meaningful exchange with modern life. But such

guidance is of the greatest importance. By “exchange with modern life” I do not mean playing shrill Bollywood music at village festivals, not having all-night video-shows of Hindi-films, but I mean introducing as many young students to the pleasant and relevant aspects of city-life, relevant for the progress in a village environment. I mean making study-tours to the hills or to the ocean, attending workshops and festive events, or inviting guests from Kolkata or from Europe to stay in our villages. And indeed, there have been dozens of volunteers from abroad staying in our villages. And I realize how much of fresh activity, innovative ideas they offer especially into the life of young pupils. I believe such interaction connects with Rabindranath’s ideals, it conforms with Visva-Bharati on an elementary level.

If there have been frictions and tensions in our group they have primarily surfaced due to personality clashes. Until today I see a major role for me in creating a peaceful and harmonious environment in which alone work towards a common aim is possible. Team-work is not a forte in this society. All of us have to constantly encouraged to leave petty concerns aside and maintain and nourish a vision. In fact, it has been a disappointment that it is so complicated and rare that we shed our partiality. Development work is indeed – and cannot be anything but – an exercise in humility and selflessness, as for example Swami Vivekananda has emphasized.

Another disappointment has been that this work of 25 years has received only modest resonance within the academic community of Santiniketan. I must mention Prof. Kumkum Bhattacharya and Ranjit Bhattacharya as exceptions. Apart from Snehadri Chakraborty there is no member from the educated Bengali middle-class who have committed themselves to give a hand in this work on a consistent and continuous basis. So I had to bear the ultimate responsibility, unable to share it with anyone. A foreigner who in the first twenty years has persisted on a one-year visa, not knowing whether it would be renewed, this was a risk which weighed heavily on my mind.

I often reflected on this absence of interest. My own failure to fully integrate myself into Bengali middle-class society, either by marriage or affinity, is probably responsible for this absence of interest. On the other hand, if I had succeeded in

becoming part of the Bengali middle-class, I would most likely not have launched into such a private development enterprise, just as no Bengali family has done so.

My role in the villages, as I see it, is not that of a guru but of a facilitator. I realize that this is a modern Western concept. In India it is easier to project the image of a guru. But I have strictly rejected such attempts in favour of shared discerning responsibility, of democratic team-spirit and participatory action. I have, however, demanded certain moral guidelines from the group that has developed – most importantly, total honesty. If my co-workers give or take bribes, possibly even with the good intention of helping development, our donors and I myself cannot expect that they deal honestly with us. This would undermine and ultimately destroy the idealism on which our work is built. Further, I do not take any remuneration whatsoever for my village work. The regular donations which our German support-group “Freundeskreis Ghosaldanga und Bishnubati” around Mrs. Marianne Pal Chowdhury remits to the Ghosaldanga Adibasi Seva Sangha is fully used for village work. This gives me the emotional and moral independence to campaign for commitment and strong positive values among our employees. Doing something for money is always limiting.

In all these years I have had a double profession. I have been a writer, translator, editor and journalist. But in the first two decades half of my time went into village work. I enjoy this dual role. I have written a novel and numerous stories and essays in German based on my experience of village life. Thus, these two halves of my life have been complimentary. Further, I have always seen my village work as a *sāadhanā* with which I can learn humility, selflessness, tolerance and love. There have been no better teachers for me than our village people.

A final warning to myself: Village development is truly a path covered with many hidden risks. There are too many ways on which one can go astray and err. Dedication alone is not enough, neither are a strong will or sufficient funds. Professional CEOs of development agencies may ask me: Why do you meddle with development work? This is the business of experts, of professionals! – I agree. However, my model of long-term guidance cannot be executed by employed professionals. All I could do, and have

done all along, is to take the advice and the occasional assistance of various professionals. For the rest, I have relied on my sensitiveness to human needs and human aspirations, constantly adjusting and revising my concepts, all the time remaining as responsive as possible to what my Santal friends would convey to me through their words and gestures and actions. I am still learning from each new situation.