

The Statesman

Sunday 12th February 2012

The path less trodden~I
In The Company Of Santhals
Martin Kämpchen

WHEN I met Sona Murmu, who then was the only educated person of Ghosaldanga, a Santhal village 10 km from Santiniketan, 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. He 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 schoolchildren. None of them, except Sona, 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 today the most urgent requirement for 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 he was regular and disciplined. For him, as well as for Boro Baski, the youth leader in Bishnubati, a neighbouring Santhal 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.

I realised that some of the reasons 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 an enormous effort it takes for a village person to emerge out of a lifestyle which is content with life as it was spent by parents and grand-parents. I realised 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, and on the learning process that we ~ as a group ~ have gone through. The foremost principle was that after identifying the two youth leaders, 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. 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 (RSV), our Santhal day-school, you will not see impressive buildings, but scores of girls and boys at their studies.

In the beginning, I concentrated on three areas which needed hardly any funds: the evening schools I mentioned, then afforestation and medical help. It is a primary aim because I realised that in order to attract the villagers’ interest in holistic development, we could not abandon them to their own helplessness in the hour of crisis. It is scary to realize how much of malnutrition and disease can be caused by the lack of hygiene and body care; lack of proper social habits are rampant right in the shadow of Rabindranath’s Visva-Bharati.

As soon as the village youth leaders had completed their studies, they decided to sacrifice chakri (employment) and dedicate themselves full-time to village development. Only gradually I comprehended the enormous grip employment has on the minds of young 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 a degree of permanence and not be just the passing fancy of a few young idealists.

It took 20 years until I began to retreat. I felt my duty was over once the group of youth leaders could manage village development work responsibly on their own. This follows the old adage “Help for Self-help” which is, however, so difficult to fulfil. 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 festival 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.

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. 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, the uneducated village farmer. Debate generates responsibility and participatory activity.

Later, the checks and controls that keep any normal NGO going were gradually introduced by my senior friends. After having worked for about 20 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, the organization of their offices and the symbols of their functioning from which they derived their prestige. Some of all that also entered into our work; and a few also left to accept government jobs.

(To be concluded)

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Monday 13th February 2012

The path less trodden~II

Santhal Quest For Identity

Martin Kämpchen

WHEN I had begun to disengage myself from the day-to-day decision-making process, 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 Santhal and non-Santhal 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 fathers have been illiterate farmers or labourers. 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.

A third, possibly even more momentous and psychologically strenuous social change has come 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 to enter 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 tried 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 the nurturing of Santhal culture. All of our pioneer members feel deeply motivated to preserve, propagate and develop Santhal 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. A Museum of Santhal Culture was started. 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 to the struggle of educated Santhals to find their identity within mainstream Bengali culture. Should they become Westernised, or Bengalised, or else discover their value system in Santhal 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 written on this aspect. The artist Sanyasi Lohar, though not a Santhal himself, lives in Bishnubati, a Santhal village. He has developed Santhali designs into a sophisticated art-form. Moving outside the Santhal villages to present Santhal culture has led to the strengthening of Santhal identity and a feeling of self-worth.

This feeling of self-worth can be strengthened not by wanting to protect them from outside influences, but on the contrary by guiding them into a meaningful exchange with modern life. I do not mean playing shrill Bollywood music at village festivals, nor holding all-night video-shows of Hindi films. 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 going on study-tours to the hills or to the ocean, attending urban workshops and events, 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 realise 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. It is disappointing that this work spanning 25 years has received only modest resonance within the academic community of Santiniketan. My own failure to fully integrate myself into Bengali middle-class society, either by marriage or affinity, is probably responsible. On the other hand, if I had succeeded in becoming part of the Bengali middle class, I would most probably not have launched such a private development enterprise.

My role in the villages, as I see it, is not that of a guru but of a facilitator. I realise 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, 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 with us. This would undermine and ultimately destroy the idealism on which our work is built.

In all these years I have had a double profession. I have been a writer and translator. 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 complementary. Further, I have always seen my village work as a sadhana through which I can learn humility, selflessness, tolerance and love. There have been no better teachers than our village people.

A final warning to myself: Village development is truly a path covered by many hidden risks. There are too many possibilities to 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 salaried 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 sensitivity towards human needs and human aspirations, constantly adjusting and revising my concepts, all the time remaining as responsive as possible to what my Santhal friends would convey to me through their words and gestures and actions. I am still learning from every new situation.

(Concluded)