

## **A Close Look at Poverty among the Santal Tribals**

by Martin Kämpchen

For the last twenty-five years I am associated with a tribal village which is situated about eight kilometres outside Santiniketan. In this column I shall again and again refer to Ghosaldanga in various contexts as this village has become a part of my life in the way one's own children are part of one's life. I have learnt a great deal from this Santal community, and in the same way have I tried to give it all it was able to absorb from me. Over the years we have in a joint effort established an alternative development which is not project-based, but wants to focus on the villagers and their educational, cultural, moral and material advancement. We have been clear in our desire not to build three-storeyed houses, but to "build men", to build the characters of the young and the old. It is a noble, but frightfully difficult and even dangerous task. Who can assure me that I myself have the noble and pure character that I want to see others obtain? By which means do I discern that I have the leadership qualities, the moral and intellectual balance needed to bring an entire village community forward in its struggle to lead a decent life? Two points are essential: First, while teaching others, my own desire for self-development must on no account ever falter. Second, I have in this long experiment depended keenly on my European value system, my "European-ness", while all the time remaining sensitive to tribal culture and to the tribal psyche. My efforts focussed on the bringing together of these elements. Therefore I feel justified to address this subject in a column called "Euro-Pulse". Was I successful? I have stopped asking myself this question. All I know is that we still continue while other village projects have collapsed. – This much as a preamble.

Today I want to share my experience at Ghosaldanga by discussing a seemingly "academic" question which is however painfully practical: What does poverty mean? And how can village people escape poverty and reach a better quality of life? Unfortunately, we have learnt to understand poverty in abstract economic terms, by the calorie-count and financial graphs, or else from photographs that appear regularly in newspapers and arouse merely pity. A deeper understanding of poverty demands that we enter the minds of the human beings living in that state and try to see them, as much as possible, as they see themselves. This must happen simply, without the baggage of ideology or emotions.

Let me first ask this question: What do under-privileged village persons themselves expect from life beyond sufficient food and the other most basic requirements of clothes and shelter? My experience at Ghosaldanga is that their *conscious* demand towards life does indeed not extend much beyond food, clothes and shelter. They are gifted with a benign contentment with what they have always had and what they see all others in the village possessing. They enjoy a kind of gut-level, unreflected, instinctive satisfaction with what they have always had. A part of their condition of poverty is this near-total lack of a capacity to *imagine* anything beyond their present state. This “mental poverty”, this poverty of intellectual, emotional and creative activity, can be alleviated only by (1) exposure to the choices they do have even in their under-privileged life, and (2) by formal education. I consider the ability to imagine something beyond one’s own state, an *awareness of choices*, as the most important major step to get out of the “food-is-all-we-need” mindset.

Apart from this conscious requirement of food, clothes and shelter, there are, however, several *subconscious expectations* among Santal village people which become conscious only when they face the lack of these needs. Among them I list three as most essential. Firstly, a body *healthy and strong* enough to perform its normal duties and work and not become a financial and mental burden on the family or village. As long as the family is healthy, a poor person’s life may be neatly balanced between demands and their fulfilment. But illness throws such a life immediately into turmoil. Expensive treatment, loss of manpower, lack of understanding of one’s own body’s needs cause a financial and an emotional crisis.

Secondly, a normal, harmonious *family- and village community-life* which supports the individual and gives him or her an important part of his or her identity. A vital ingredient of family- and community-life is a fully functional, happily performed *ritual life*. Poor persons who are unable to fulfil their perceived ritual duties (to parents and elders, to the guru, to the spirits and to the deity) are indeed desperately under-privileged and feel worse off than even persons who cannot always fill their belly.

Understanding this, I have never refused persons who came to me for help to perform a family puja, or to do the last rites of a close relative. As a modern European who is a confessed individualist, I may have taken the line that these people should get out of their socio-ritual obligations which burden them disproportionately to their income and social status. But I learnt that they prefer to move in tattered clothes, rather than give up their ritual tradition. It is this which integrates them into the social and metaphysical life-process.

One of the astonishing discoveries I made while living near poor village people was that they have a *deeply conservative mind*. Earlier my conjecture had been that poor persons lack set values and fixed moral standards, that they are flexible and uninhibited by educated value-systems and by prestige thinking. The very opposite is true! Even and *especially* illiterate persons imbibe from their infancy a certain value-system and a cultural formation, and they adhere to it adamantly. The deep conservatism of poor persons in their ritual, social and cultural life stems from their inability, again, to imagine anything beyond what they have grown up with. It is a “fundamentalism” which does not come from a discriminating conviction but from the simple fear that by non-adherence to these conservative norms, they may lose their very identity within society and their feeling of worth. Only with education comes the ability to differentiate between essentials and non-essentials and consequently the liberality to reject certain norms one has grown up with.

The third basic need, I feel, is a *relationship with nature and with a space called “home”*. This relationship extends to the fields, the trees, the pond, the courtyard and the mud-house, with the domesticated animals, then with the elements like sun and rain, night and day, and the great natural events like birth and death. From this union with nature and home and from a close-knit community life spontaneously evolve a variety of *cultural activities*. Most important are the festivities accentuated by dance, song, music, drinking and smoking. The tribals who lightly claim that all they want is to fill their bellies, would certainly not wish to sacrifice a pot of rice-beer and a smoke, nor dance and flute-playing.

It is with these cultural activities that “quality of life” properly speaking begins for them. Formal education is normally considered imperative for achieving an increased quality of life as it prepares poor village persons to make conscious choices. Watching the Santals dance, I realise that through dance and music they already internalise an important part of education. They celebrate the quality of life which is given to them through their culture and community life. I am astonished how expressive and articulate they become. I realise that these various complicated dance forms with their intricate rhythms are in themselves a kind of education for them. Through dance and music Santals learn to express their emotions of joy and fear, sorrow and protest. And by expressing them, they relieve themselves of the overwhelming pressure of these emotions. No education can achieve more with the inner human being than that, namely to teach how to balance one’s emotions and how to have a healthy, realistic hold on life.

These activities are, obviously, optional. They do not contribute to an income, nor do they stop persons from earning their income. Santals may just as well desist from dancing and singing, as of course many of them, estranged from their culture, already do. So there is freedom of choice.

Having said this, I still realise from my experience at Ghosaldanga that formal education is indeed *the* major factor provoking a leap forward with regard to quality of life. Such education is, of course, a two-edged sword. It teaches poor people to comprehend their own situation in a more objective way. On the one hand, they become intellectually enriched. But on the other hand, since education is not immediately and automatically followed by economic wealth, the result of education is often resentment and frustration. The students realise what they are missing due to their poverty. Hence, formal education does not *per se* lead to an improved quality of life. Indeed, the painful awareness education generates may also downgrade one's quality of life. Yet, education can just as well awaken their unknown inner resources and ambitions and empower them for the struggle to achieve aims like economic prosperity, increased knowledge and social position.

Education, as I see it imparted in the rural schools attended by the sons and daughters of poor families, does not really fulfill the requirements of education. Education should be an end in itself. It should unfold talents and latent dispositions and develop innate intelligence, apart from giving the keys to open the treasures of knowledge about the world around. But education as it is actually imparted, supplies knowledge packaged for achieving sufficiently high marks in examinations and ultimately grabbing a salaried job.

At the very least, education should teach certain skills needed in daily life, like boarding the right train to get to a particular destination, like not getting cheated in a shop or by an employer, like talking coherently to the doctor about your ailments and leading a hygienic life. Education normally does not take care of such rudimentary targets. They could relieve poor people of their all-pervading sense of insecurity in public life. If any one of our school-going village boys or girls does imbibe such basic skills, it is rather an accidental product of education, not one of its targets.

Education opens up a variety of influences and choices for poor villagers. Some of them are welcome, others not. Education stirs up more or less informed predelections, appreciations, aversions, desires and longings which students must integrate into their lives. Even very intelligent rural students will be initially overwhelmed by the choices they could make, but cannot achieve due to their village-based, poor life. All the enticing and interesting choices can apparently be redeemed only in urban areas. Many begin to

dislike their village-life and focus on its limitations, rather than on its cultural possibilities and natural beauty. At best, education temporarily *destabilises* poor rural students and it is entirely left to them either to turn their inner turmoil creatively into a life with enlightened choices within their poor rural setting, or to veer towards the conventional choices they can get in a city-based life. There is a third option, namely to return to their pre-educated life-style and slowly slide into a semi-illiterate state. Education as such does not automatically improve the quality of life of poor people. It all depends on what the students make of the education imparted to them.

Santal students have a particularly tricky predicament. Education to them means entering mainstream culture which is Bengali-oriented. Embarrassment about their own cultural peculiarities as well as the urge to integrate into mainstream (non-Santal) culture for personal advancement make Santal students neglect their own tribal culture, sometimes even disavow it. Education with all its benefits tends to make them rootless. Very few Santal students see the need and are able to nurture their culture and at the same time take a respected position in society at large. Chances are that he or she will lose out on one side. Few men and women from the Santal community or the non-Santal communities who are aware of the need for such a healthy balance try to empower meritorious students to achieve it. Has education provided these village tribal youths who have escaped poverty, with the quality of life they were looking for?