

Obscure side of the moon

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Martin Kämpchen looks back on 40 years in India

WHEN I travel by train from, say, Bolpur to Howrah, often people accost me asking, “How do you like India? How many days are you here already?” I reply in Bengali that I have long stopped counting the days. “I am in India since 40 years.” The reaction I receive always frustrates me. Rather than erupting in delight about a white-skinned foreigner staying on in their country for so long, most fellow-travellers gape at me in disbelief.

“Forty years? That is a very long time!”

“Indeed,” I reply, laconically. “Do you think I am overstaying?”

Only after that question do my interlocutors resume their welcoming mode of conversation, common to most Bengalis. But I do not blame them for their reaction. My life’s journey has not been the normal kind. It is difficult to understand how somebody from Europe who could have had a comfortable life with a career as an academician or a journalist and writer would stay on in India beyond a few years. Those who do stay, mostly women, marry and start a family. Others are associated with a company or a university and do business or teach. But somebody who, like me, has never been married nor employed, neither in Europe nor in India, and never has held any academic position, to stay on as a freelancing writer, translator and cultural journalist, is, indeed, strange.

Often I do not understand myself. How did it happen? It was certainly not planned that way. And it was not at all easy to tread this path. It needed sacrifices on the personal and professional levels, patience and strength to persevere. Yet, I have never regretted having spent almost my entire adult life in India. I cannot imagine another life but the one I have lived... But let me start from the beginning.

It will surprise readers that coming to India has not been a dream come true. As a school-going boy, I desperately wanted to visit Africa. I read books on West and East Africa and befriended students from Nigeria, Ghana and Liberia. When I was just 13, a Goethe-Institut was opened in my German hometown of Boppard, which is situated on the Rhine river overlooking a majestic bend with vineyards and woods spread on its slopes.

The Goethe-Institut — called Max Mueller Bhavan in India — invites students from all over the world to study German. Most of them arrived directly from their country and, in the beginning, felt lost and lonely in Boppard. So I stepped in, showing them the post-office, bank and bookshop, aided them in their studies and helped them to move on to study at a German university which had been their aim. Their mentality suited me, their stories fascinated me and a great longing to visit their country overpowered me.

Obviously, in the 1960s it was impossible for a student to fly to Africa without financial assistance. Although my father was the principal of the Secondary School and College (a gymnasium) in Boppard, he could not have afforded to gift me such a trip. He rather sent me, repeatedly, to England and France, mostly as an exchange student, to learn English and French. Consequently, I had to wait until I enrolled at the university to fulfill my aspiration. Every year, a government-subsidised organisation (called Asa) sent a group of competent German students, after a rigorous selection process, to a number of Third World countries. For three months, these young men and women studied the society of their respective guest country, made contacts with academic institutions and development agencies and then returned with a deeper understanding of these countries’ cultural wealth and economic needs. I was in my very first semester at the University of Saarbrücken when I applied for a travel grant to Nigeria. I prepared myself studiously and was selected. Then something unexpected happened. A tribal war broke out in Nigeria, the infamous Biafra War. One evening, I

received a phone call from the director of the donor organization informing me that the group of students destined for Nigeria could not proceed. Its members had to be distributed among the remaining groups. The director asked me, "To which country do you want to go instead?" I remember standing in a telephone booth (private phones were still rare) and spontaneously saying that one word which changed my life — "India". I do not know why I said "India". At that time I had no Indian friends and had read little about India. I had only studied, intensely, Mahatma Gandhi's theory and the practice of non-violence. There was a reason for this: I had applied for the status of a "Conscientious Objector".

German youth were drafted into the army at 18 because military service was then still compulsory. But I objected to serve in the army because this was the same as agreeing to carry a weapon and be ready to kill in the event of a war. The German government provided an alternative service for objectors like me (in hospitals, old-age homes and kindergartens, for example), but before being recognised as a conscientious objector, the applicants had to appear before a tribunal of the defence ministry and prove the genuineness of their conviction. Gandhi's writing helped me to clarify my position. Many young objectors were not accepted. Some just wanted to get around the drudgery of military service. I prepared myself carefully, reading Mahatma Gandhi so as to present valid arguments against war and violence. My parents and my teachers opposed my decision, but I persevered and was given the status of a Conscientious Objector. This was before the beginning of the Vietnam War, during which the opposition to violence became much more widespread in Germany and other Western countries. This, then, had been my only connection with India. But once I had said "India", I began preparing myself for the three-month study tour with gusto.

When we, a group of five students, arrived in Bombay in the summer of 1971, we spent the first night in a decrepit hotel to which the taxi-driver had taken us from the airport. After taking a shower in the evening my skin began itching from the sultry weather. It felt as if a horrible disease was creeping across my body. I thought I would not live to see the next day. Well, I did, and a few days later the group shifted to the home of an upper-class gentleman with whom we had established contact before our departure. The soft-footed servant boy impressed me. The dignified splendour prevailing in that majestic flat, which shut off all the noises and smells of the city, dazzled me. Yet, I wanted to take in all the noises and smells! I craved to see and hear and touch it all. It was a delight to take the crowded suburban trains or the buses, to walk with hundreds of others on the roads. People stopped me to ask questions, and I replied, walked into their houses, made quick friendships and was ensnared and thrilled by the utter directness, simplicity and openness of communication.

In Europe, I had experienced the guarded and subdued manner of communication, tied to a number of rules, and was innocently unaware that any other manner was also viable. I realized that such immediacy of connecting with others was really what I had longed for. Much later, when I began to live in India, I also understood the negative side of such spontaneity – the invasion of privacy, the nagging omnipresence of people and noises.

After 10 days in Bombay, I said goodbye to the other members of my group as I needed to travel alone to sense the pulse of Indian life. I travelled in a third class train compartment to Kolkata. This meant living in the same compartment with a few dozen people for two days and two nights. What better education in Indian life can one think of!

I arrived at Howrah station with a fistful of addresses. First, I put up with the family of a high-ranking police officer whose brother I had met in Germany. After a week, I shifted to the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. Its founder, Swami Nityaswarupananda, was in charge. I had brought with me a letter of introduction by the son of the famous German philosopher (and friend of Rabindranath Tagore), Count Hermann Keyserling. I had met Arnold Keyserling and his wife in Vienna, had told them of my impending visit to India and they dispatched me with introductions and rich blessings. Through him, I also established contact with the family of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and his circle.

It was the time Kolkata was plagued by the Naxalite onslaught. I was warned and admonished not to move around alone and not to walk on empty and dark roads. But I could not care less, because I saw no danger. Everybody was so friendly and welcoming! In fact, I never faced any trouble.

From Kolkata I travelled south – to Madras, Cochin, Quilon, Trivandrum, Kanyakumari. Then to Hyderabad, Bangalore, Coimbatore, back to Madras and to Kolkata. All by train and bus, staying mostly with families and in ashrams of the Ramakrishna Mission. After spending a few more days in Kolkata, I proceeded to Varanasi and Delhi and from there returned to Europe. While revisiting my new friends in Kolkata, I already promised them that I would be back. They may have put this down as the ramblings of an over enthusiastic youngster, but Swami Nityaswarupananda offered me the post of a German teacher and I was confident that I would keep my promise.

I have often tried to describe the initial impact India had on me, and each time I have to struggle which words to choose. I had grown up in two different places in Germany, had travelled to England and France with my parents and alone; almost each year we spent our vacation in northern Italy, which is my maternal grandmother's birthplace. Further, I had been a student in Vienna, the USA and Paris before arriving in India. So I arrogantly felt that I had "seen it all". Yet, the "otherness" of India struck me hard. And instantly its reality resonated within me. I realised that in India another side of my being, which I had not known in Europe and America, which was hidden from myself, now came into the open. In a way, I became a complete human being after I encountered India.

I, therefore, liken the experience of India to the discovery of the obscure, hidden half of the moon. We look at the illuminated shape of the moon and unthinkingly confirm, "This is the moon!" We are not conscious of the fact that the reverse side of the moon exists as well. Likewise, my experiences in Europe and the USA constituted to me "the moon", until I realised the reverse side while travelling in India.

Rather than just staying back and plunging headlong into Indian life, I was, however, clear in my mind that I had first to return to Europe to complete my studies. Remember, this was the time of the Hippy movement and the Flower Children culture. Many young men and women swept into India to lose themselves in their fantasy India, destroying the bridges to their home country behind them. This option never tempted me. I saw no reason to reject European culture and my Christian upbringing. I always sought of enriching my personality with India, which then should reflect in my work as well. I never saw the need to choose the one to the exclusion of the other.

In Vienna, I completed my doctoral thesis in modern German literature on the "Depiction of Cruelty and Inhuman Acts in the Literature of the First and Second World War". The topic was clearly influenced by my choice of being a pacifist. In January 1973, I was ceremoniously handed over my doctorate. In April, I was on my way back to India. I assumed a teaching post at Gol Park and, accepting Swami Lokeswarananda's kind invitation, I lived at the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama at Narendrapur.

Now I began to realise that visiting India as a guest and living in India were two different modes of existence. As a guest, I was always treated as the atithi narayan, the "guest who is to be treated like God", extolled by Hindu scripture. I was fussed over, I felt loved, felt important. In no other country have I come across such sincere and vibrant hospitality. Yet, living and working in India meant that I had to integrate myself with the society around me and that the society allowed me to get integrated. I was eager to accomplish my part.