

# Report from the Santal-Villages

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In the end of my time in India, I met an Indian friend to sing together. I had a small travelling guitar with me and first we sang some western songs. Afterward her musically talented father took the instrument and began to tune. After some time, he gave it back to his daughter and she played some songs for me that were originally written for Dotara (a traditional Bengali two string instrument). It was fascinating to here such unfamiliar sounds from the well-known instrument and the situation became a symbol for my attempt of the last five months: to get into the the way of living and thinking of the Santal village people bringing my own cultural imprint.



Sometimes I was impressed by the harmony of our worlds for example

- when I was dancing through the village with women between one and a half and seventy years
- when I talked to someone and gained an insight of what is really important for the other person
- in the connecting silence of the prayer times in RSV
- in the encounter with the children of Ghosaldanga Evening School and their openness and curiosity
- when I was harvesting rice together with my neighbour

Many frame conditions like food habits, to sit on the floor or, not the Santali but at least the Bengali language where already familiar to me because of a voluntary service in Ansansol (ca. 80km from Shanti Niketan) in 2012/13 and felt more like coming home than like a new world for me.

But from time to time I also had to deal with the “crooked tones”. One of them was the exposure to the role and situation of the women. Many young women in my age in Ghosaldangha seem to be very busy with children, house and field work and to have very little possibilities to choose their lives. I also want to mention that one can see a huge development in this context. Nowadays girls go to college whose mothers got married with fourteen years. Still it was not easy to communicate what is going on in my mind when in my current situation after finishing university my thought often

circles around how to find MY place in an individualized world. On the one hand it seems tempting to me to escape form the “pressure of realizing myself” but on the other hand I also realized that self-determination and independence are of very high value for me.

One of the biggest challenges during the voluntary service was to deal with the unclear role as a volunteer, without knowing the circumstances of the project. During my first voluntary service in Asansol I had defined tasks and working hours that’s why I tried to clarify the expectations when I first met

the leaders. The answer to my questions was only „You are not here to work.” and I kept wondering “And why then?” That’s a question I’ve not totally resolved yet but it led to a lot of thoughts about my view of development cooperation. Is it, like I tend to, good to observe a lot, avoid judgements and try to adapt the way of life during such a relatively short stay? Or is it my responsibility to name problems that are easier for me to see because of my good educational chances and to try to make a change? What do my efforts to share the simple village life, that still impresses me, bring? And would it be better to make life more convenient for the people there?

After all I still worked quiet a lot in the garden, even though it was not expected. First of all because with all the thoughts I just mentioned the down-to-earth work is pleasant for me and I really enjoyed the beautiful environment in the RSV garden that sometimes seems like a little paradise especially during the wonderful sunsets. On the other hand, because in such a big garden work never ends. Especially for the vegetable gardening, that as I was told later had never been done as much as this year before I took a lot of responsibility. It was a big advantage that the vegetables grown in Indian winter season where all familiar to me from my apprenticeship in Germany. For example, we grew French beans, tomatoes, garlic and beetroot. Nevertheless I also learned new things. When I was cutting spinach, trying to sort out the flowers, a neighbour came and told me they are very good in potato curries. And the Santal tradition of using wild herbs or “weeds” for delicious meals inspired me. Theoretically I already knew that orache and others are eatable, but the mental separation between crop and weed was often too strong.



In my everyday work I was confronted with the reality of the dry season. During the time from November to February we only had real rain two times (both around New Year) and the rest of the water demand had to be covered by irrigation. Without a lot of technical equipment (watering by pipe or can) that’s a lot of work. On top of it often left me feeling bad knowing about the problem of the sinking groundwater level. In the area irrigation is often done by flooding that leads to high evaporation losses and can destroy the soil structure. If there will be more vegetable gardening in RSV I think it would be sensible to think about work and water saving alternatives. Inspired by my boyfriend (you will probably read a lot about that in his report) I tried mulching (covering soil with rice straw or leaves) in a lot of vegetable crops. It’s not the hole solution for the water problem but it can help to decrease evaporation and therefore irrigation work and has the potential to build up the soil structure so that it can keep water longer. This and other ideas we tried to share other gardeners in seminars and talks. The experience of drought is very valuable for my gardening future in Germany too where due to climate change alternative growing systems will become more and more important. It was encouraging for me that such alternative systems are also tested in Dolaria (next to RSV) and in a permaculture project next to Bolpur and the people there were open for cooperation.

I was always very happy, when some of the students came to the garden to help. I enjoyed the time with them, and I hope that I could give an example that gardening work and agriculture are not only for the ones who “couldn’t get somewhere else”.

Now my guitar is tuned Western style again but still the other tones, the touching encounters and different experiences will go on sounding in my soul.

I am very thankful for the kindness with which we were welcomed in the villages and I hope to see the people again one day.

