

Report of my stay in the villages Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati 2015

I arrived at Kolkata in the evening and then had a small journey going to the villages. Mono and Anile picked me up at the airport so that I felt secure during my arrival in a country which in many ways is in strong contrast to my usual area and its circumstances.

I had a room to stay in the girl's hostel which is part of the RSV-school. I got to know the students, the teachers and other people living in the vicinity. I also got in touch with the everyday life including the local language, foods, the nature and landscape and the villager's general way of thinking. I noticed that people were focused very much on living in the present, which I liked. My first impressions were quite positive and I got excited for the things I was going to experience during my stay. I took joy in discovering differences as well as common ground in our behavior because it offered new points of view and helped me develop mentally and spiritually.

The food Dhona and Sushilla prepared for me was tasty and I enjoyed it even though I initially had trouble getting used to eating with my hands. But after some observation and practice I learned to satisfy my hunger in a proper way eating a combination of rice, dal and curry.

As the initial excitement had faded I started to realize that getting in contact with the students more than superficially was hardly possible which was partly due to the language barrier and partly due to me being a rather shy person. Sometimes I had asked them to use English when talking to each other so that I could get an impression of what was on their minds.

Every evening I attended the gathering for praying, singing, talking about current issues and possible problems as well as reflecting on deeds and actions that were already in the past. The teachers at the gathering tried to awake the adolescent's interest in topics with deeper significance which they should ponder, because that is an important part of being a student.

This also got me thinking and appreciating what was around me deeper.

Mono and Anile introduced me to the Santal culture by inviting me to traditional festivals, pujas and local families. We visited evening schools and weddings and I learned about the Santal cultural year beginning with the spring festival in March, as well as their customs and traditions. They let me feel the daily challenges and obstacles as well as the joyful moments of their lives and taught me about the custom of arranged marriage, filling me with amazement. That way I experienced Santal people as honest and humble, living with their animals a life much different from the noisy and hurried city life. I got more and more into the traditional Santal music and enjoyed observing and taking part in their simple and repetitive dances that trigger a trancelike state.

I found that these dances had a balancing effect as they were moments of joy and excitement in a life otherwise filled with hard labor and few unexpected things happening.

This, I suppose explains why Mechthild's and my playing German folk dances on my violin raised the students interest and got our connection to become deeper and richer.

Out of my many activities during the two month stay, I want to describe a few in detail.

I taught the students on how to craft juggling balls and how to use them. Most of them were

quick in learning and their skillful hands amazed me. I left some juggling equipment with the students which I hope they have put to good use.

I also made attempts in teaching English lessons which turned out to be a big challenge for me since I had to teach using English and gestures so that students had a hard time following my words. Lacking somebody to discuss my ideas with and how to turn them into something real I had trouble being creative and living up to my expectations of holding successful lessons.

Nevertheless, these experiences are of great value to me and I might have benefitted more from those lessons than the students attending.

The time of my stay was undoubtedly impressive and eye opening and taught me a great number of things about the world and myself. It also showed that there are many things yet to be learned.

At the end of my report I would like to emphasize again the extraordinary Santal hospitality which I have experienced to be very honest and true.

Magdalena Fochler