

Report about my stay in the Santal villages Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati

1.11.2016 – 3.1. 2017 by Lilli Knodt

My journey to India started in early November 2016. Until February 2017 I would stay in the tribal villages of the Santals, before travelling on through the northern parts of India. While I was still in Germany I wrote in my diary:

Because I cannot imagine how my time in India will be, I cannot prepare anything than the organizational things.

Although I had a rough idea about what I could expect, I knew that this would not automatically correspond to reality.

I arrived in India during „Diwali“ – the festival of lights. Throughout this time Indians decorate every house and every street with chains of lights and light fireworks all night long – also in the night when I arrived. The streets of Kolkata were crowded with celebrating people and giant statues of Gods and Goddesses, which were drawn through the main arterial roads. So every cliché about India was confirmed in the first hours of my arrival: loud, colourful, full of people, and kind of chaotic. In the middle of all this I was sitting with Ramjit and Anil in a taxi. The two young leaders fetched me from the airport and accompanied me to the villages.

During my time in the villages I lived in the Guest House in Ghosaldanga where many other volunteers had lived before. In this time I grew very fond of the place. Located between the big ricefields, it was kind of a retreat place for myself, and it became a popular meeting and playing point for the younger children in the village. In fact I was never really alone because there would always be a little gang of children playing in front of my room. They were not older than five years and did not speak a word of English – neither did I speak Santali - but we connected in such different ways, playing cards, dancing or just sitting together. So actually these little children were my Santali teachers!

Three times a day I was welcome in the Lakhiram family, who cooked delicious food for me. Anil always took care of me whenever I had questions or needed something. More than once I was asking him endless questions about the Santals or India in general. To have someone like him to take care of you is very valuable, especially in a totally unknown environment.

Looking back in retrospect I spent my first two weeks in Ghosaldanga as if in a dream. Everything was new, everything had a different smell, everything seemed strange, my life had no routine yet and I just let myself flow with the people and time. I got to know the RSV school, with Sanyasi and the teachers Ranjit, Padma and Dasarath and explored the surrounding environment and villages. These first two weeks of orientation are very important for volunteers until you have found a new daily routine.

After that time, some scenes that seemed totally astonishing before would become a very normal thing for me, e.g. watching humans soap themselves from head to toe at a pump or observing giant water-buffalos sitting casually in the middle of little paths in the village.

After this period of orientation, Boro Baski and I created a routine for me. From morning to lunchtime I attended classes at the RSV where I taught English mostly for class III and IV and also for the highschool students. With the younger students I danced and sang to English songs as this was very helpful for teaching the right pronunciation. Everytime I was surprised how well you can get along without speaking the same language and just communicating through gestures and facial expressions. The kids made this sort of communication very easy, because they are so open-minded and spontaneous, while they know endless songs and dances which they present proudly!

In the afternoon I organized one hour lessons of Taekwondo with the highschool students. With this I wanted to cultivate a feeling for the body and help building up students' selfconfidence, especially for the girls! Everytime it was a lot of fun to see how much energy they put into this training. I had a great time doing this! After that around 6pm I joined the evening school in Ghosaldanga for teaching English. Teaching these little students is forcing you to be spontaneous. The younger students especially are not used to sitting down for a long time and therefore stand up and play around as they like. So I included this in the teaching. As long as you stay open and really involved with the children the best things arise!

After I noticed the highly polluted environment and streets while riding my bicycle outside the villages, I organized an „Environment Seminar“ at RSV. In fact the immense extent of plastic pollution is a huge problem in the whole of India, as there is no comparable environmental consciousness as in European countries or any knowledge about the bad effects for the nature. So I started with the young people in the villages by painting big posters to explain the bad

effects on nature and animals. It was just a little beginning, which the teachers now want to continue. But also for other volunteers this is a good point to start!



The „Environment Seminar“

Besides that, I took part in the daily village life as much as I could. For example I helped with the „*Nutrition programs*“ organized by Parbuti or every Saturday morning when the doctor came from the city. With those programs it is very interesting to observe a structure that actually helps and improves the daily life of the village people! Providing constant health care or just granting access for the villagers is a key to help these villages to survive and flourish.

I cannot forget the time, when an old man told me in Santali about his suffering, which I felt I could understand somehow. Or I still remember the toddlers running to Parbuti's house with their little silver bowls and carrying their younger sibling to get their nutritious food.

From time to time I visited other Santal villages to see their schools and projects going on together with Pintu. Gandhi said: „The future of India lies in its villages!“ and while going around the countless Indian villages, which you can hardly see from afar, because they are so small and hidden under palmtrees, than I know what he meant by that! As a foreigner and stranger I was walking around and staring curiously into the houses and courts. While doing this the people stared back at me of course, but as soon as I greeted with „*johar*“ (Santali) or „*namaskar*“ (Bengali) they all answered with a smile. If you think about it again this is an absurd situation but I am so thankful for having the chance to gain such unique impressions.

It is remarkable how much the Santals identify themselves with their traditions, strongly expresses through community. Dances and songs were solely performed in groups, and never by an individual alone, just as the group always pray together, -these are manifestations of this strong sense of community. I recommend every (future) volunteer to attend the morning and evening prayers at RSV! For this the kids sit down in a dense circle like penguins facing towards a candle in the middle. Especially in the evening when it is dark it was one of the most impressive memories of all: darkness, just a little light from the candle, the threefold blow on the conch, that marks the beginning of the prayer, and than the collective singing under the sky and stars.

Whenever you visit a country like India, one often wishes to experience the „true“ India. I had an incredible chance to do so with this project! I could experience religious festivities by the Santals like a puja and at the same time be part of the everyday life in a village.

During my time in Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati my respect for a culture that could preserve huge parts of their ritual traditions and way of life over thousands of years has grown immensely – because now I understand what that actually means.

I want to say thank you to every villager. Without exception they greeted me warmly and took me into their community. Especial thanks to all the young leaders and all their wives, as well as Sona, Sanyasi and Boro, who were my contacts all the time!

Mostly the children have become a part of my heart. I am still overpowered by their open hearts and simple enjoyment of life. Love never ends...!

