



PARTHA PAUL

Kampchen interacts with Santhal girls in Bishnubati village

The German Tagore

Martin Kampchen implements Tagore's ideals in two Shantiniketan villages

■ RITAM HALDER

MARTIN KAMPCHEN is a familiar sight in the twin villages of Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati, on the outskirts of Shantiniketan, in West Bengal. A frail 64-year-old German, dressed in a blue shirt and black trousers, he rides on a bicycle down a narrow road surrounded by lush fields. As soon as the villagers, mostly Santhal tribals, see him, they rush to greet him, and converse with him in Bengali. Kampchen is a guest at a fair, but the Santhals treat him as one of their own. As children take part in talent contests, and women prepare croquettes, against the backdrop of music set to flute and drums, Kampchen blends into the crowd. Were it not for his Caucasian appearance and his accented Bengali, he could be mistaken for a Santhal.

Kampchen has been working in Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati for over 30 years, helping build schools, roads and toilets, and implement afforestation and fishery programmes, as well as sponsoring the education of poor children. Overseeing the work of Ghosaldanga Adibasi Seva Sangha and Bishnubati Adibasi Marshal Sangha, which he helped villagers set up in 1987 and 1997 respectively, he has been an advocate of developmental work and has arranged funds for them, from the Consulate General of Germany in Kolkata and through various German organisations and individuals.

How did Kampchen, who lives in a rented single-floor house, in Purbapally, Shantiniketan, come to be associated with the villages? The German credits his work to being inspired by the life of Rabindranath Tagore.

"Tagore's ideal is that men, irrespective of nationality, work together and achieve a common goal," he says.

Kampchen is a revered Tagore scholar, and has been conferred the Rabindra-Puraskar (1992), Rabindranath Tagore Literature Prize (1990), the Order of Merit of the German government (1999) and most recently, the inaugural Merck-Tagore award (2012), among others, for his works, which include five volumes of Tagore's poems translated into German, the bard's biography in German, and extensive research on Tagore's visits to Germany. Today, he freelances as a journalist and translator, and is working on two new Tagore projects.

Tagore was an accidental choice for the scholar. Born in Boppard, a town near Frankfurt, Kampchen did a PhD in German literature in 1973 from Vienna. In 1971, he visited India for three months on a German government travel grant, during which he travelled across a host of cities such as Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Hyderabad and Bangalore among others. From 1973-76, he worked as a lecturer at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Kolkata, and later did another PhD from Visva-Bharati in comparative religion in 1986. "I first studied literature and began writing; then, in India, I studied religions and also embraced a spiritual life. Combining both, I found my home and support, a mirror of my struggles and doubts, my consolation in Tagore," he says.

It was not Tagore though who inspired him to stay in Shantiniketan, where the poet set up an ashram, a university, and sought to free villages from ignorance and poverty. "The formative years of my childhood were

spent on a farm. After Calcutta and Madras, I did not want to continue living in a big city. I was looking for a rural setting and was suggested Shantiniketan for the continuation of my studies. I stayed on beyond my PhD because I became dedicated to the work with the Santhals in Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati. I could not abandon them midway," he says.

For people-driven development, Kampchen learned Bengali, which helped him understand what villagers wanted. "Each afternoon, I would take out my cycle and move around nearby villages, stopping to chat with farmers on the road or in the fields," he says.

Such interactions gave him the opportunity to put Tagore's thoughts into practice. Sona Murmu, a resident of Ghosaldanga and a social activist, recalls his first meeting with the "German *dada*". "Martinda used to come to our village to meet the Bauls and listen to their songs. During one such visit, I met him. I had just completed my Class 12 and enrolled in college. Slowly, our friendship developed. One day, he suggested starting a school for the village. So, we started an evening school with six students in 1986. Today, we have 80 students. Initially there was no money. Martinda paid for a blackboard, chalks, books, copies, pencils and lamps," says Murmu, who has travelled to Germany, Austria and Bangladesh along with Kampchen to showcase "our art, music and dance globally".

Kampchen is now keeping away from active participation in development. "I don't want to be a leader, I wanted to make leaders. Over the years, people like Sona Murmu have proved their mettle, and are taking forward the cause of Santhal development," he says. ■