

Can we ever understanding India?

Interview with Dr Martin Kampchen who has been in India since 1973. A postgraduate in Indian Philosophy from Madras University, he holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Religion from Santiniketan. Acclaimed as a translator, an author and editor, he is also the cultural correspondent of the German national daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Apart from writing and publishing, he has been involved in raising the living standards of two Santal villages near Santiniketan. He has been the recipient of Rabindra-Puraskar, Rabindranath-Tagore Literature Prize, and the Order of Merit of the German Government.

GH You have lived in India for 30 years now. Have you settled down here permanently?

Settled? That would mean that I'd have taken Indian citizenship or owned a house or married here. None of these has happened, I would say, quite consciously. While I was doing my Ph.D. in Santiniketan, I developed an interest in the works of Sri Ramakrishna and Rabindranath Tagore and started translating them directly from Bengali into German. This I could do only in India because I needed the support of friends and the appropriate cultural atmosphere. And finally I got interested and involved in the development of two tribal villages near Santiniketan. But at no stage have I pulled down the cultural "bridges" that link me with Europe.

GH What kind of experience have you had in India?

Indians welcome those who come here as guests for a few weeks or months. Things get a bit more difficult if the guest wants to stay longer and be integrated into the local population. Many Europeans, who live in big Indian cities, give themselves up to grand lifestyles with an extremely high level of comfort and services, which they could have never dreamt of back home. They make use of the cheap labour and the feudal traditions still existing in the country. I personally find this simply disgusting. This is a reversion into the colonial mindset, which first makes human being unequal and then exploits this inequity to one's own advantage.

GH Then, what kind of life do you lead in India?

Right from the beginning, I couldn't have thought of a different kind of life in India from the one I lead now. The simple people here have always interested me. They accept me as I am, as a friend who wanted nothing but togetherness, a feeling of belonging. At the same time, this has brought me numerous disappointments. I was cheated, threatened, humiliated and denounced.

GH Have you ever been discriminated against or abused because of your ethnic origin?

India is culturally so diverse that it has to absorb numerous internal tensions and conflicts in order to exist peacefully. Above all, the difficult process of self-discovery and the population explosion have strengthened its defence mechanism against all that is alien. As a foreigner I was not allowed to teach at Santiniketan University.

Add to this the natural discrimination an unmarried person faces in a strongly family-oriented environment. Social interaction takes place not as an individual, but more so as the member of a family. An individual person cannot be easily integrated here.

GH How do Indians view the West?

The West, including Germany, is rather glorified in India. However, it is a very imbalanced view: the high living standards, the relatively high social security, the tourist attractions and the glamour of a booming entertainment industry are the things in the West are known and sought. But what about Germany's civilisational achievements like democratic equality, a strong civic sense, a lively cultural life, public cleanliness and discipline, environmental protection and so on?

GH Should development in India be at the cost of the marginalised and have-nots?

For me, development is neither industrialisation nor agricultural reform. For me it would be a change of mindset. The governments in the last few decades have not done enough for education. Now they find it difficult to make the semi-literate masses understand the need for change. Uneducated, poor people will rarely appreciate the reasons for change.

GH You have been actively involved in the development of two Adivasi villages near Santiniketan. What is the nature of that work?

For 20 years I have been helping two Santal villages near Santiniketan — Ghosaldanga and Bishnubati — evolve an alternative model of development. I always remain in the background as a motivator giving young men and women the chance to develop their own ideas and function as the real motor of development. My goal is to strive for a "holistic" model of development, not just economic development. Young people should get a chance to actively shape the development suited to their needs.

GH What are your observations regarding India's social and political development?

I feel the greatest problem is the unrestrained population growth. India has to absorb an additional 15 million people every year. This may be possible for a while because of the excellent family traditions, which borders on self-sacrifice. But no self-sacrifice will help when vital resources like water become scarce.

On the other side, significant progress has been made in the field of technology. India has to be understood and meaningfully shaped not only in the context of its geographical size and large population, but also through the cultural and religious models it offers to the world. In the final analysis, the development of India poses a great challenge to the entire world.

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