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School as family
The Ecole d'Humanité in Switzerland
by Martin Kämpchen

On his third visit to Germany in 1930, Rabindranath Tagore spent a few days at the Odenwaldschule not far from Heidelberg. The link between him and the school was Aurobindo Mohan Bose, a nephew of Jagadish Chandra Bose, and an erstwhile student at Santiniketan. On his travels in Europe, the young man had come across the Odenwaldschule, and as he felt that he was welcome there he stayed on for weeks. Later, he convinced Rabindranath to visit the school and its founders, Paul and Edith Geheeb, who happily hosted the Indian poet for a few days. This led to a relationship between the two educators which lasted a decade, almost until Tagore's passing.

Aurobindo Bose felt that a similar spirit worked in the two men as "for both their first loyalty was to that unique thing called the personality of man, and not to the State". For him the Odenwaldschule and its successor school, the Ecole d'Humanité, held such deep attraction that he made them "my home, the one spiritual and material centre of my itinerant life". Paul Geheeb had to leave Germany in 1934 to avoid persecution by the Hitler regime. He and his wife, after much hardship, established the new school, the Ecole d'Humanité, or School of Mankind, high up in the picturesque mountain ranges of Switzerland. When I first visited the school more than twenty years ago to use its archive for my research on the school's Tagore connection, I was so fascinated by the ambience as well as the spirit of the school that I revisited the school again and again.

The school has continued its link with India. Arnim Lüthi, who was successor of Paul Geheeb, once showed me some photo albums in which I discovered pictures of Paul Geheeb with Jawaharlal Nehru and of Rajiv and Sanjay Gandhi, then adolescents, holidaying in the school. Indira Gandhi and Edith Geheeb met and corresponded with each other.

An in-depth comparison of the Santiniketan model and the Ecole model of education would be relevant. Observing the daily activities of the Ecole, I was struck by the similarities. One defining feature of the school is that all are resident students who live in small communities, called "families", around a teacher couple. It needs a great deal of idealism to work as a teacher here. As the school is private, its teachers earn significantly less than their colleagues in government schools, besides they are saddled with the duty of looking after the students who are members of their respective "family". They eat together, they sleep in the same house, the students do their homework and perform household duties under the guidance of their family-teachers. In this way, the students learn to act as a team, they begin to understand the meaning of social responsibility, as well as the dignity of manual work. I cannot help but see the ancient

ashram-model in this which Rabindranath followed to some extent. Geheeb was not directly inspired by this model or by Tagore, but by intuition they both arrived at similar ways of life which would give an all-round formation to their students' personality.

The second defining feature of the Ecole is the large variety of subjects and courses the students can choose from. Apart from the conventional core subjects, they are able to take up handicrafts like woodwork and clay-modeling and sports courses like swimming, mountaineering, hiking and tennis. Further, singing, instrumental music, painting and modeling, theatre, and computer courses. Different courses are offered depending on the season, like skiing and snow-boarding in winter, and the availability of competent teachers. None of these courses are taken lightly as each plays its role in the holistic education of the students. When I last visited the institution in early September, the entire school went on an all-day "blueberry hike". The wild-growing blueberries were ripe, and students and teachers went out to collect them. Again, here we are reminded of Rabindranath's ideal of education through music, dance, the theatre and the arts.

A third feature is the total egalitarian informality of the Ecole's atmosphere. The school functions bilingually. Courses are offered in German or English as many students come from outside Europe. Most teachers speak both languages. In German we distinguish between the honorific Sie, comparable to apni in Bengali, and the informal Du (tumi). Teachers and students universally use informal modes of address. Significantly, such informality does not lower the respect towards elders or infringe on the discipline of the juniors; rather, it supports a sense of cooperation.

Connected with this egalitarian spirit, and perhaps as a result of it, is an unassuming honesty. Doors are kept unlocked day and night. Nobody fears thieves and burglars from outside or inside the community. When two friends and I visited, we took a room in a private house a few steps away from the school's sprawling campus. The lady of the house who works in the school's kitchen, was out when we arrived. She had, for all to see, attached a message to the front door saying: Das Haus ist offen. Ich melde mich heute Abend. Heidi (The house is open. I see you this evening. Heidi).

Well, in India, including in Santiniketan, this would mean an open invitation for thieves to ransack the house. What with the multiplying of security guards even in the Abode of Peace, with walls cordoning off the university area to guard it against encroachment, this Swiss experiment with pure collective honesty appears like a call from paradise. And so is the egalitarian spirit, although the old habit of referring to all teachers as dada and didi is still alive.

I mentioned that I recently visited the Ecole d'Humanité along with two friends. One of them was Sanyasi Lohar, an artist from the Santhal village, Bishnubati, near Santiniketan. Sanyasi attended Kala-Bhavan of

Visva-Bharati and he then set up a workshop in his village to work with village men and women who he trains in crafts like batik, pottery and terracotta. His activities are being supported by a Dutch foundation as well as by our Santhal school, the Rolf Schoembs Vidyashram, of which he is the art teacher. In the past two decades, I have been able to send Sanyasi to the Ecole three times to teach art and crafts for several months. It gave me deep satisfaction thus to continue the axis of the Ecole with Santiniketan (even though Santiniketan was hardly aware of it). And my pleasure was no less seeing Sanyasi, the sensitive village artist, bloom among the students and teachers in far-off Switzerland, to see how well he was accepted and with how much confidence he returned to his family in Bishnubati.

This year, after completing the art courses at Salzburg to which he was invited, Sanyasi and I went to his old Swiss school. How lovely are those gently undulating deep-green meadows that we passed by train. Such beauty, I had to tweak my ears to realize that it was true what I saw. Does beauty mould people's character? I asked myself. The same question I often raise when I cycle across Indian villages.

Several teachers had retired since our last visit. But none had moved far away. Most had settled in the vicinity in order to be in touch with the Ecole and perhaps even to serve it in some non-formal capacity. A school of such kind depends on its former teachers and former students. Many students have, in fact, returned to support the school financially or by some other means. This can happen only when a school has become family.

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