

Looking back

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"I had to endure that I was misunderstood, and even looked down upon, as my chosen way of life — rejecting employment and position and its status symbols, staying alone without a family. I do not regret to have walked it. After 45 years, I still crave to understand India better and better, I still crave to 'belong'"



The writer working at the computer in his room in Santiniketan (2009)



Rajiv Gandhi confers PhD to Kampchen at the Convocation (1987)



With Günter Grass (2005)



With Amartya Sen (2016)

India became independent 70 years ago. I never imagined that I would remain in this country for 45 of these 70 years. Normal expectations would insist that there was someone in my ancestry who was Indian or who spent a lifetime in India and inspired me to follow a similar course. But this is not true. My parents, born in 1906 and 1913, were the unlikely persons to have links with India. Both my mother and father received a good education; my father ended his career as a college principal. But the dominant reality in their lives was two World Wars and the struggle to build an existence after the Second War. India was far off their mental map.

Why was I so different? Wanting to leave my small town in the Rhine Valley, wanting to accomplish things which I had not seen others doing before me? I wonder even today... As a sixteen-year old, I went to the USA on a one-year scholarship. Later, I opted to become a Conscientious Objector refusing military service in Germany. Both were firsts in my school. I studied outside Germany, in Vienna and in Paris, and as soon as my university studies were completed, I made the leap to India.

My prolonged stay in India, however, had a deeply personal reason. While in Vienna attending University, I had arduously followed the prescribed courses, taken the numerous exams and powered through the exercise of getting a Ph.D. degree with youthful élan. But my temperament reacted against such regimentation. In India, staying in an ashram of the Ramakrishna Mission at Narendrapur, south of Kolkata, I enjoyed, for the first time, what, to this day, is so crucial for me: freedom - the freedom to read and study, to write and contemplate and to do whatever engages my attention and my passion. I took German classes at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Kolkata in the evenings three times a week. The income I got was sufficient for my very frugal needs. I had the whole glorious day to myself. The more I tasted that freedom the less I was willing to abandon it for the sake of employment, of security, of a better and regular income.

What situation did I face when I arrived in India in 1973? Can young people today really imagine a world without smartphones, mobiles, computers, without internet with all its facilities? No computer-games, no email? Can they imagine a world without motorbikes, air-conditioning, scanners, fax-machines, xerox-machines and even without television? A world in which the only car to be seen on the road was the good old Ambassador which has become an endangered species by now. We still had double-decker buses in Kolkata which meanwhile have left the streets, and lots of tram-cars which have become very few, although it would be ecologically prudent to increase their number. Typewriters and land-phones were then in the possession of the privileged few and in the offices of only higher-level administrators.

I had arrived from a country in which many of these civilizing attainments mentioned just now had not yet arrived as well. Television, yes! But probably it was still in black and white. Xerox-machines, yes! But they were still in the very early stages of providing quick and accurate copies. Telephone, yes! But no mobile phones which now guarantee eternal availability.

In the first 30 years of my stay in India, I did not make a single phone call to Germany. The land-phones worked alright locally, but phone-calls to the next city or to a foreign destination were truly a time-consuming adventure which one did not care to repeat too often.

My father, who died in 1986, never received a phone call from me, and my mother who died in 2007, got phone calls only in the final phase of her life. She was open to new technologies and began to phone me at regular intervals when she was in her nineties from her room in the Senior Peoples' Home which she occupied then. Before that she had even learnt to operate a fax-machine in her room sending me one letter every week.

Basically, for three long decades communication with my family and with the outside world on the whole, was through postal letters. Today, this is beyond the imagination of the young or middle-aged persons in India or in Europe who have grown up with email, with WhatsApp, with Skype-telephony and mobiles. Letters, always sent by Air Mail and always by Registered Post, used to reach their destinations within two to four weeks.

So, for a reply to any questions or for a reaction to the content of our letters, my parents or I would wait for one to two months. By that time, naturally, the passage of time had provided altered situations in Germany as well as in India. The result was that I could hardly intervene in activities, or influence and shape events which occurred in Germany. My parents and friends could hardly follow the events of my

life as they unfolded. The information about what had happened in my family was often outdated when it reached.

One of the positive features of this isolation was that my focus became extremely narrow. I immersed myself totally in Indian life and in my study. Distractions were few and the possibility to concentrate was real. Today the smartphone has become a potent "communication drug" whose attraction few, even the most educated and aware persons, can or, in fact, want to escape.

I lived in a small room inside the campus of the sprawling ashram of the Ramakrishna Mission. Narendrapur houses a College and a High School with hostels, a dairy farm and several technical and agricultural institutions.

The most important feature for me was that I was able to participate in the life of the monks of the Ramakrishna Order freely. I witnessed their pujas which were performed on many festival days. I regularly attended the beautiful, moving evening prayer in one of the student hostels with songs and ceremonial aarti.

I sat for meditation side by side with the monks in the shrines and prayer-rooms. I was even permitted to look after one Ramakrishna shrine for several months, opening it in the early morning, cleaning the floors, decorating the image with flowers and maintaining the different tiny, sophisticated rules and habits of ceremonial bhakti. It gave me such joy and satisfaction!

In retrospect, I can say that by doing this, and while living with the monks, I absorbed more of the essence of Hinduism and of the religious mind of Indians than I learned from books and later during my University studies in Chennai and Santiniketan.

For decades, I carried my precious portable mechanical type-writer around with me which was an eye-catching contraption as portable type-writers had not yet arrived in India. From Kolkata I moved on to Chennai, which was still Madras, to again take up University studies. I did an M.A. in Indian Philosophy and then returned to West-Bengal, namely to Santiniketan, for a second Ph.D. in the field of Comparative Religion. While staying at Chennai, I transformed my life from a salaried person to a freelance writer. I have already mentioned the glorious freedom such a life provides.

Nobody dictates a routine. So it is a continuous pushing oneself to ever renewed creativity - towards new thoughts, new formulation of ideas, towards the integration of new experiences into one's system of thoughts and beliefs. What exuberance when creativity is successfully expressed, but there is also the experience of fear and mental pressure, self-doubt and exasperation, even despair.

It is a constant internal dynamic process, and those who have the energy, the courage and the necessary supply of creativity will never want to surrender such a life to the boring career of a 'corporate' profession.

As a writer and journalist, I had, from the beginning, the desire to portray a just, balanced and full-fledged picture of India. My desire to understand India was burning bright, and I sought various avenues of presenting India to my German-speaking readers. I realised more and more that the image of India in Germany was cliché-ridden to say the least.

This image has two extremes and very little middle-ground. The one extreme is an India influenced by the German Romantics who, over two hundred years ago, had discovered an "ideal India" in the holy scriptures of Hin-

duism and in the very early travel literature. India was for them the "cradle of humanity" and Indians a human species replete with nobility, humanness and the divine knowledge. It was more a reaction against the dissatisfaction with their European life-style than a realistic appreciation of India. This romantic idealization of India has, however, continued to hold sway over the German mind until our time.

The other extreme is to 'essentialize' India as a poor developing country of the so-called 'Third World'. Both extremes are untrue. Unfortunately, the German educated public has received very little substantial information and reflection from serious journalists or writers or film-makers who could create a more complex middle-ground between these two extremes. Even sophisticated media reports on India have the habit of slipping into unproven statements, prejudices and clichés.

In my own limited capacity, I wanted to rectify this situation. I occupied a vantage position to do so. I had lived in India since several years, I had already travelled quite extensively in the country, and I had an experience of living with 'the people' - with 'simple' people and with monks, apart from having interacted with academicians at the University. I did not live in a westernized enclave as many journalists or travellers from Europe tend to do. In 1980, when I shifted to Santiniketan for a Ph.D., I added one vital prerequisite for knowing India and then writing about the country: I learnt an Indian language, Bengali.

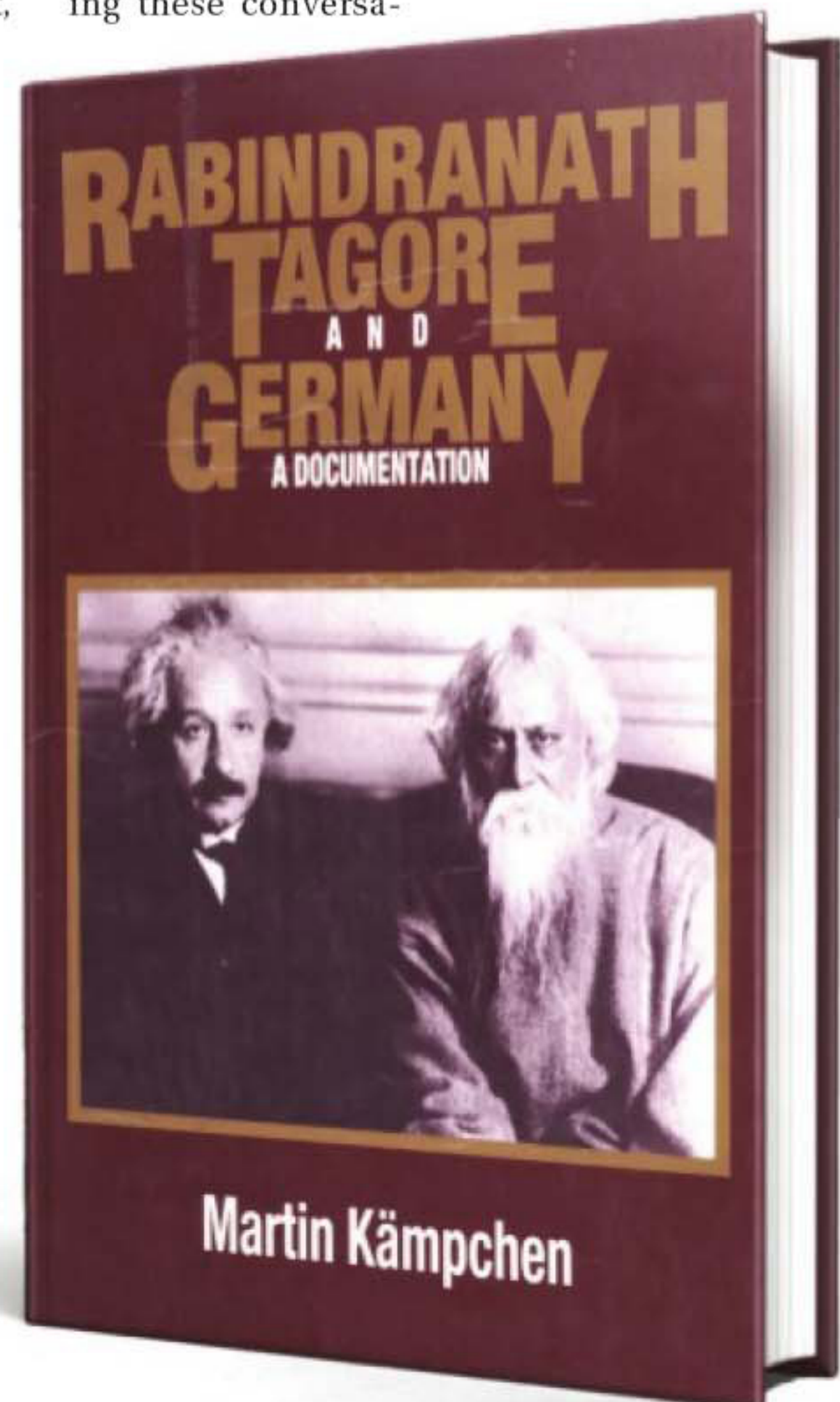
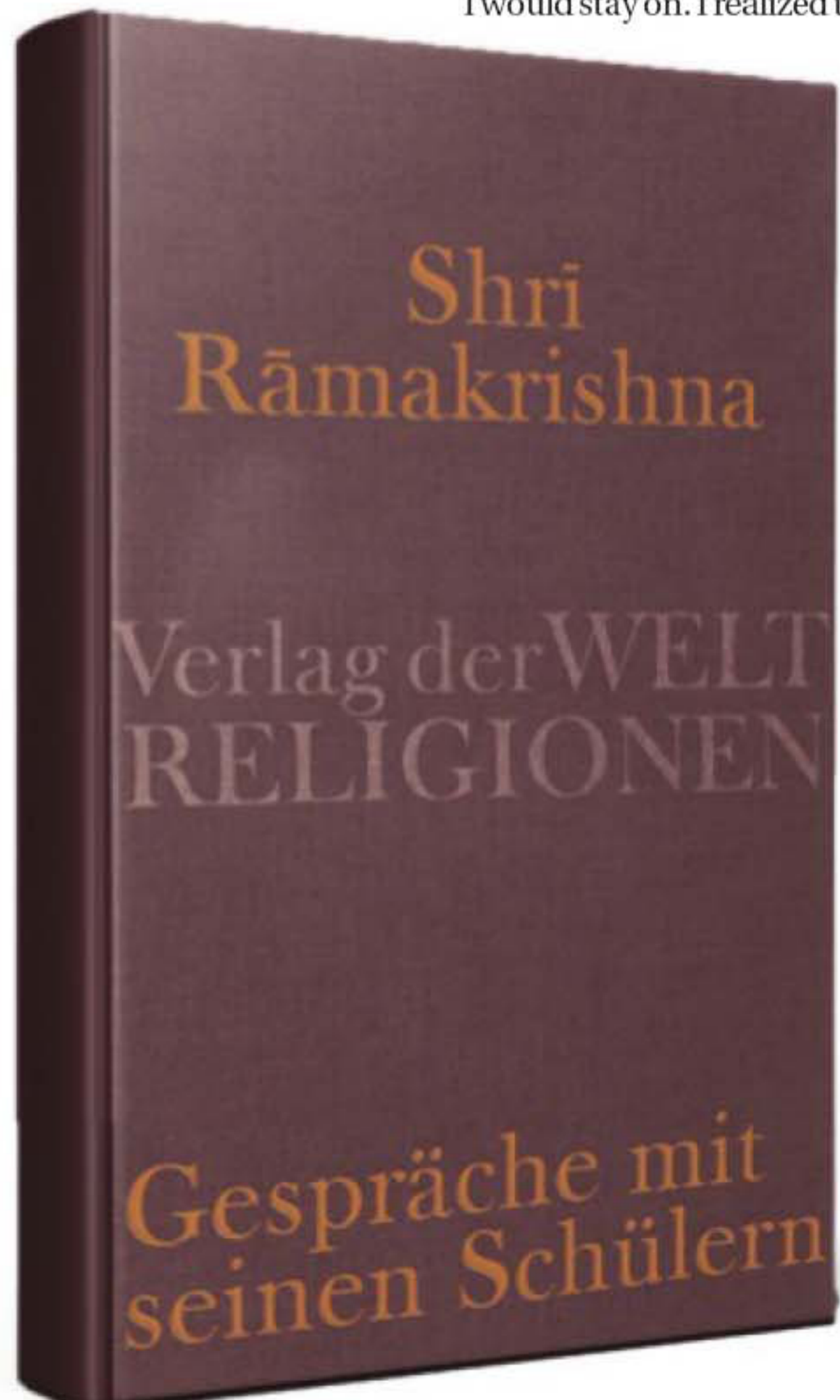
I had been in India for over six years when I moved to Santiniketan, and I had not learnt any Indian language because I was unsure how long I would stay on. I realized that,

on the one hand, learning an Indian language was an absolute must for knowing this country on a deeper level.

On the other hand, I was aware how difficult it would be for me to learn an oriental language with its different script, its syntax and its complicated cultural and religious baggage. If I did decide to learn a language I wanted to embark on this in all seriousness. Once I enrolled as a Ph.D. student of Visva-Bharati, it was clear to me that I would spend at least five more years in India - enough time for studying Bengali.

It cannot be emphasized enough what an enormous transformation my understanding of India experienced after I slowly began to be able to participate in the conversations around me. My emotional tendency to bond with so-called 'simple' - unlettered, manually working - people could now be fully realized, and it was a surprise how much I had actually missed when I could not speak their language, when I had to solely rely on my power of observation. I began to find fault with travel writers or foreign correspondents of newspapers, of television or radio stations in India who consider it adequate to have just a working knowledge of English for doing their job in India.

Having studied Bengali vigorously day after day with several tutors for two years, I was able to make two shocking discoveries. They resulted in keeping me engaged for 20 or more years and induced me to remain in India beyond my Ph.D. studies. I started to read the conversations of Sri Ramakrishna with his disciples, called in English translation 'The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna'. Sri Ramakrishna was the subject of my doctoral thesis, so reading these conversa-



tions in the original was imperative.

This seminal religious and cultural text is, especially in West-Bengal, but no less elsewhere, regarded as a foundational book of the Bengal Renaissance, a book which even today countless pious Hindus read for inspiration and spiritual guidance. Yet, the English translation is woefully inadequate. It adds sentences, sometimes whole paragraphs, it deletes others, it flattens Ramakrishna's originality, his crisp, forceful spoken tone into a conventional, rather dull language.

This first shocking discovery inspired me to decide that I wanted to translate this book into German and do justice to it. It took me two decades to work myself through the five volumes of the Bengali original. The German translation was published in 2008.

A similar discovery I made with regard to Rabindranath Tagore. He is the first and so far only Indian writer and poet who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. His international fame is founded on one slim volume of poetry, 'Gitanjali', which he himself translated from Bengali to English lyrical prose. For the sake of practicing my Bengali, I began to read several poems from 'Gitanjali' and, for my own practice began to compare the originals with Tagore's own translations. I was shocked that the poet received the Nobel Prize for a volume of self-translation which did not even approximately reflect the lyrical power of the original. Here again I felt the urgent call to alter this situation, and I began to translate Tagore's poems into German poems to adequately project Tagore's genius.

The first volume of translation was published in 1990, the eighth and last one in 2011. It was a huge struggle to solidly bring Tagore to the notice of serious German readers as a figure of World Literature. Tagore was known rather as a "Wise Man of the East", as a "prophet" or "mystic", but, for obvious reasons, his quality as a poet and writer had been doubted or ignored.

This demonstrated to me the power of translation. A translation, well-done or inadequately done, can create or destroy an entire cultural tradition. It can portray an entire cultural era correctly or falsely. A false translation can lead to wide-spread erroneous assumptions about a culture or religion or a country and its people.

For the last twenty-odd years, I have been attached to the cultural section of Germany's sophisticated national daily newspaper, the Frankfurter Allgemeine. First, there is a mundane reason: Large newspapers like this one pay well and I, as a freelancer, am unable to live from the books I write or translate or edit. From early on, I had aspired to enter the profession of a cultural journalist.

The second reason is that in the German media India is hopelessly underrepresented as a cultural entity.

This has been so ever since I keep an eye on the image India projects in Germany. Is it strange - or is it natural - that 'those non-European countries which have a strong economic relationship with Germany, such as China, Japan and the USA, are being highlighted culturally as well? India is - neither politically nor economically - of paramount importance to Germany, hence the neglect to focus on its cultural and social life.

I have published hundreds of essays in the Frankfurter Allgemeine about social and cultural issues, apart from many reviews of books on India and reviews of German translations of Indian literature. The principal method I follow to do justice to India is to contextualize. Any social or cultural issue or event must be described within its context.

The context must take the country as a whole into consideration and once this is established, the specific issue can be emphasized. If the context is not being unfolded, the issue is often falsely sensationalized and misrepresented.

Let me mention one last area in which I have been active for the last three decades. This is my social work in the tribal villages around Santiniketan. I have often described this in my contributions to The Statesman. I discovered 'Village India' very early and witnessing Indian village life I was both fascinated as well as distraught. Following Mahatma Gandhi's words that "India lives in its villages", I claim that we do not know India if we have no intimate knowledge of its village life.

Having spent some time in a village as vital as knowing an Indian language, I have met scores of city people with no knowledge of and even with a hidden disdain for village life. Such disdain is born of ignorance of the beauty and natural dignity of village people.

For me as a foreigner from the West who spends his life in India it is natural to relate to the disadvantaged sections of the population around me in the attitude of a participatory friend, a mentor or benefactor. I felt, for myself, the urge to improve the life of the students who I befriended. Nowhere in German social life can I learn what I am able to learn in Indian villages. This interaction with village life continues and has taken on many layers.

To strike a just balance, I need to speak of the hardships that I endured for these 45 years. To bear the heat, and especially the humidity, has never been easy and my exhaustion is getting worse. The powercuts, congested streets, crowded transport in trains and buses, the aggressiveness in public spaces, and the invasion of privacy I had to accept without really getting used to it.

I realized that in India I would forever be a private person, unable as a foreigner to accept official positions and responsibilities. I had to endure that I was misunderstood, and even looked down upon, as my chosen way of life - rejecting employment and position and its status symbols, staying alone without a family - appears to be so unusual, so odd to most people.

Yet, this has been my chosen path. I do not regret to have walked it. After 45 years, I still crave to understand India better and better, I still crave to 'belong'.