

The East-West Encounter



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Abstract : In the global village of today the mere mention of east as east and west as west sounds like an anachronism of the past. However, although a lot of momentum has been gained in terms of technological homogeneity across different nations of the world, a lot still remains to take place in areas of cultural exchange and a true understanding of each others' religions, social and natural environments. This could sound clichéd in the context of a fast-growing internet awareness and especially in the American melting pot situation where one nation seamlessly merges into another. It is my intention to put forward relevant observations in order to describe the cultural intensities of Germany and India-the points of divergence and convergence where both combine to enrich and enhance a comprehensive view of human life. These new understandings and awareness definitely lead us to those areas where higher truths start to form and emerge. We have indeed been a privileged community to whom the Humboldt Foundation has provided a generous platform from which to start a long and exciting journey. At this point it will make sense to mention that this journey has been an extraordinarily rewarding one in the fact that it has been shared by the members of our personal families, our spouses and children. In fact, it would not be incorrect to say that many of the most significant cultural exchanges have taken place through individual and social bonding developed by them at the time of our stay in Germany. The different areas of cultural exchange are found to reside in various institutions such as the Church and schools-in the inbuilt social system of transport and tourism and the social values built around them. In fact, the first most striking thing about the country is the fusion of the past and the present; tradition and high-tech seem to move along hand-in hand. This gets reflected not only in the beautiful architecture that simply surrounds and overpowers the first-time visitor but also in the quality of day-to-day life that the German citizen leads. My observations are based on first-hand encounters that have developed over the years to give both me and my family the insight and understanding of ourselves and others in the universal context of mankind.

Key words : Germany, Internet awareness, Cultural exchange, Insight and understanding

Introduction

In the global village of today the mere mention of east as east and west as west sounds like an anachronism of the past. However, although a lot of momentum has been gained in terms of technological homogeneity across different nations of the world, a lot still remains to take place in areas of cultural exchange and a true understanding of each others' religions, social and natural

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The soul of a country lies in its language spoken and the Humboldt Foundation provides courses for the first time learner of German so that he may make the best out of his stay in Germany. The spouses of the Humboldt fellow may also take up the

language course and is, in fact, encouraged to do so. Germany is not, in the first instance, an English speaking country and it is only the younger generations who are actually learning it formally at school. The older generations have little or no knowledge of the English language.

It cannot be denied that interactions in a new society such as the German one is not any kind of smooth sailing. The barriers of language, colour and culture are embedded in the social fabric. Initial social or cultural encounters of any kind are viewed in terms of resistance or receptivity of the other-not only that, the resultant equation or benefits of exchange also depend on the willingness of the other to promote receptivity. At this juncture it is interesting to note that a lack of knowledge of the language sometimes is useful for a better and more genuine human bonding. In this case there are fewer pre-conceived notions, very few prejudices as in the presence of a commonly shared language where it is easy to get caught up in verbal warfare and competitive theory. However, the same situation with children and youth may be different. A ten year old hardly takes a month to fluently understand if not speak the new language of communication. Mutual strangeness and fascination leads to an open willingness on both ends to share experiences philosophies and human values of every level. Friendships grow and eventually families bond together in meaningful and long-lasting ways.

Self-knowledge is gained through travel and new-found discoveries in terms of different landscapes, food habits and cultures. Comparison and contrast puts pre-existing knowledge into sharper and more lucid light. Errors, misconceptions and myths

are exploded and therein, new awarenesses evolve into higher truths of humanity and bondage.

What is truly amazing is the wonderful and inextricable mesh of tradition and high-tech woven into the texture of German life and society. In fact, the external magnificence of architecture and landscape hides the advanced technology and scientific knowledge that goes behind the preservation and maintenance of this awesome land. One is full of high emotions when one witnesses a land that has, for some reason or the other, been for a long time deprived of aesthetic recognition, but one is overwhelmed by the re-established order of a country that had to start from scratch after the two world wars. The journey did not only comprise of the physical restoration but also a cultural and traditional one.

Just as the West touches the very soul of the East, so also does the instinctive spirit of the East come close to the intellectual sensibility of the west, and the result is mutual exchange that is indeed beneficial to each one.

The visitor starts to fully understand the concepts of time, punctuality, money, words, relationships, organizations, discipline and orderliness. Deadlines and intellectual global perspectives are observed and respected. On the other hand our Western counterparts pull down rigid barriers and extremes of following their self-made rules and norms of living.

Religion here in Germany is steeped into the lives of the people whether they choose to belong to the Church or not. The wonderful churches that stand right in the middle of the hub of the city are visited by

the people in the midst of a busy routine. The church bells throng and reverberate throughout the adjoining areas of town and country to create the notes of divinity and the entire experience becomes a part and parcel of the visitor's mental landscape for a lifetime. There are community and religious festivals that are scattered throughout the year and add colour and activity to the market squares, villages, and suburbs. The daily routine lives of the people also include hectic activity but is counterbalanced by spells of leisure at coffee stands or a round of daily shopping and eating out. The average German is fully conscious of the different aspects of life and living and therefore his time encompasses different kinds of engagements ranging from sport, leisure, study, and socializing to some degree or the other. Beer, exercise, fun and frolic is a way of life in Germany in a uniform and even strategic way. Tradition and religious expressions come to life almost every weekend in the market squares and the old time atmosphere is recreated in the stalls that sell all kinds of ware from handmade objects to the freshest of fruits, flowers and vegetables. This is indeed a sensational soulful treat to say the least.

European concepts and the German way of life touches the Indian counterparts' soul in various ways and as the days dissolve into weeks and the weeks into months, the Indian sensibility undergoes a kind of transformation.

Considering that the devastating world wars destroyed the beauty and grandeur of the country to the extent of what seemed to be point of no return, the visitor's experience of visiting a place, say, like Rothenburg, is

exhilarating. A first-time visit is surely breathtaking and the traditions that are woven into the German-way-of -life blend with the German character and enhances the benefits of scientific discovery and progress.

The lessons to be learnt are invaluable. It is not easy to look at both sides of the encounter in a brief description like the present one here. These subtle and finer observations may of course be encountered in a forthcoming travelogue by the present

author. However, the essence of the east-west encounter lies in the mutual exchange of spiritual and instinctive knowledge and understanding represented by the east, which is India, and the intellectual and pragmatic approach to life that comes from the west, that is Germany. With the academic and cultural platform provided to us by the Humboldt Foundation, the geographical borders seemed to have merged and blended, at least on the Indo-German front.