

## **Scholarly Commitment:**

### **John Deeney and the Ho of Kolhan**

More than one million Ho people constitute a tribal community in Central Eastern India, where they make a living on the plateaux and hills alongside non-tribal and other tribal categories of which there are officially 62 different Mundari and Dravidian speaking ones alone in Odisha. Not too much is known as yet about the multicultural composition and conviviality of these tribal societies, little fieldwork has been done on the south-eastern fringes of the Chota Nagpur Plateau, even less is to be expected in future as tribal issues have been disappearing from anthropology's and anthropologists' agendas, and Majumdar's comprehensive book on the Ho was published in 1937/ 1950.

When considering in faraway Europe research on the Ho in 2005 for the first time Deeney was pointed out to me as a Ho scholar and Jesuit of American origin living in Lupungutu (LPG) near Chaibasa in the state of Jharkhand right in the heart of Ho country in a community of Jesuits for more than sixty years. I thought this might be a good starting point, and I did not have any other. My dependence on gaining 'friends in the field' was total and, of course, at that initial stage I could not have the faintest clue that it would be the Jesuit John Deeney to introduce me, an atheist anthropologist, into the poetics of the Ho language and the intricacies of the Ho's universe.

My husband was able to accompany me. We had never been to this particular region so far, we had never before entered tribal middle India. We were informed that the nights at the beginning of the year can be chilly and that the area is infested with cerebral malaria, that people die from it so we better take care. In a brochure with facts and figures of Mayurbhanj we later read that the region has been made out as one of many tribal-infested districts (~~Samantha 2012/KISS~~) which, however, was fine with us. We were told that there is a good library at the Tribal Research and Training

Centre (TRTC), that Deeney was a very busy man and that we needed to respect that by all means.

### Deeney and the Jesuit setting of Lupungutu

Nobody expected us, when we arrived in Lupungutu, but Deeney and other members of the Jesuit community were around. They were polite and friendly and busy as all of them were involved in some Ho related project or the other. They had a tight schedule every day leaving no spare time for two curious elderly Europeans to be looked after. Deeney himself was the most outspoken of all. "I have no time for you. I once allowed myself to become distracted from my work, so I better tell you straight away", he said when we met for the first time. He had just completed the revised and enlarged edition of the Ho-English Dictionary from 1978 whose publication was to be expected by autumn that year. His days now were completely absorbed by translating the Old Testament into Ho. He did this in collaboration with D.S. Purty, a Ho graduate and his co-worker for over 40 years about whose poor health he seemed more worried than about his own. He felt he could not afford to miss out on a single day's cooperation with his Ho *pandit*, as he called him. Of course, we accepted all of that. We were happy enough to be allowed to stay there, to be offered the safety of an ascetically furnished room with a mosquito net, three meals a day and the key to the library. At that time Deeney was 84.

So, at the beginning of our stay we spent a lot of time in the library in the daytime because most Fathers left in the morning and returned only for dinner. They worked in the vicinity and in what they call 'the interior' as priests, teachers, social workers, lawyers. Some were busy planning a scheme of night schools to be installed in villages in the jungle for Ho girls and boys who should be taught there in their mother tongue Ho, others were supervising the construction of a new TRTC complex offering non-formal and adult education programmes, computer cabinets and computer classes for *Adivasi* of the surrounding and more remote villages in West Singhbhum district. A garden was to be attached to provide the vegetables, a hostel for

tribal boys and one for tribal girls, and a repair shop for jeeps, bikes and bicycles. The new site was in Guira, in walking distance from LPG. While Deeney was not part of the outdoor activities of his Jesuit colleagues, he was part of much of it due to his published work on the Ho and his extensive research into the life of the Ho.

Over breakfast the Fathers talked about their plans for the day, over dinner they shared the experience of their days and discussed news. They did not mind us joining them for the meals, listening to their reports and eventually getting involved in the discussions. And they seemed not to mind that we were not affiliated to the catholic church although this was one of the first questions that we were asked. All were non-Ho, but fluent in the Ho language. They came from different parts of India, many from Kerala or from Tamil Nadu. All treated Deeney with that extra note of respect when he was around or when he was talking. There was an overall appreciative, undogmatic and non-patronizing atmosphere towards the Ho community and among each other. The Fathers were concerned about the Ho community's fate in particular, informed about tribal issues in contemporary India in general and argued not only from a humanitarian, but from a political perspective. They criticize the Indian governments' policy of attempting to 'advance' tribals into the Indian mainstream as a strategy of assimilation contributing eventually to the loss of their tribal identity and their distinct ways of being in the world. This strategy, they say, they attempt to counteract in their day-to-day interactions thus safeguarding and paying tribute to the specific values prevailing in the Ho's universe. It is an expression of this attitude that in parish services Jesus is addressed as Sinbonga, the Ho's creator god (an affair that required negotiations with Rome and a battle that was won), that sermons are regularly held in Ho and that Jesuit trainees in the area have to acquire fluency and precision in the Ho language. In 2008 when I attended a Ho language course for future Jesuit priests, use was made of the language material that Deeney had developed for grown-ups in which Ho is rendered in a modified Devanagari script. By then the construction work for the new TRTC in Guira was completed and the site had turned into a bustling place. The only place that was almost

always deserted was the wonderful library that had been transferred from LPG.

The Fathers usually conversed in a mix of Hindi, English and Ho. But for the occasional female guest from outside and the (Ho) cook's wife it was an all-male lot. Almost all of them had been suffering from malaria more than once. One of them had caught the disease twelve times, but this may be no exception. They lived with it and kept going. As priests Jesuits live, often for decades, in remote tribal villages. When they catch malaria there, they sometimes go to Lupungutu to rest and recover, before they go back to their 'field'. These were no-nonsense people. Their days began with Mass at five.

Deeney concentrated on his work and confined himself to his study. He was given a tiny room at the back of the refectory hall where he could work quite undisturbed or sit outside on the porch next to a garden with flowers which he was very fond of. He was usually present in the day-time, as he seldom left the compound. One day he joined us for a cup of coffee after lunch, gradually we began to sit together, have our meals together, discuss Ho issues which we had read about in the library. Quite of his own accord and contrary to his professed intention he eventually gave us some of his time and a number of articles written by him that had not yet been published and that dealt with different aspects of the Ho such as their spirit world, the relationship with their dead, their creation myths, their clan (*kili*) and totemic sub-clan nomenclature, their language and a comparison with the Munda's language. He entrusted us with the only type-written copies he had and confessed that he had taken his baby steps in computer lore only in his late seventies. It seemed that he began to enjoy our get-togethers. His academic and personal commitment, his genuine respect for Ho people, their sincerity, diligence, and their worldview certainly inspired us. Maybe he realized that I was serious about doing fieldwork and about learning their language. When we left Lupungutu after about ten days in early 2005 planning to return roughly a year later, he offered, in case his health and his time allowed, to be our teacher for a three-day crash course into the Ho language. He gave us his email address to stay in touch.

When we returned the following year, the crash course was cut down to one and a half days. Deeney was busy and above all impatient and we were too slow. But otherwise we continued to discuss Ho kinship matters and the Ho system of relationship terms of which he had collected 56 encompassing altogether five generations and brought into a graphic grid differentiating between the relationships of a man and a woman. Deeney introduced me into playing a game of Solitaire on the computer ("just a little distraction!"), he remembered Serge Bouez and Michael Yorke and his wife ("she had learned to prepare rice-beer and sold it in the market, and she got involved in silkworm breeding"), he talked about his Irish roots which had made him study Gaelic as a young man. We continued to meet also in later years, when I paid him (and the library) a visit from my field site in nearby far-away Odisha. He never questioned my decision of doing my long-term fieldwork among Ho (and Santal) people in a non-christianized region of Mayurbhanj in Odisha. In the course of time not only my husband and I had begun to consider Deeney our friend, but Deeney himself did so by introducing us to others as his friends. Of this we are really proud. We remained friends for the following five years. When eventually Deeney's health grew so weak that he needed to be transferred to Jamshedpur, I paid him a last visit. Give me a hug, he said before I left. A week later, in January 2010, he died.

He had wished to be given a Ho burial in a Ho environment which he was promised. Also, a John Deeney Memorial Centre was to be erected in Chaibasa.

### *John Deeney: the scholar*

"If anything is going to be remembered about me after death, it will be the Ho-English dictionary" (personal communication 2010). Between its publication in its revised and enlarged form in 2005 and Deeney's first appearance in the Chaibasa scene half a century had passed.

Deeney was born in Philadelphia, USA in 1921. He joined the Society of Jesus when he was 18. He came to India in 1949. He stayed on and lived in the

Jesuit community of Lupungutu most of the time. He was ordained a catholic priest in 1952 and received Indian citizenship in 1991. After having been denied it before, this really meant a lot to him and he was sure that his publications helped in this. Before going to India he had acquired a thorough knowledge of the grammar of English, Latin, Greek, French and Gaelic. After his arrival in India he studied Hindi whose script he later modified to spell Ho words. He was not in favour of promoting and spreading a distinctive Ho script such as *Warang Chiti* which already at Deeney's time had turned into a political issue. In 1952 he came to Chaibasa for a month and immediately began to learn Ho. When he was appointed headmaster of St. Xavier's High School/ Chaibasa in 1955, he already knew much Ho. He continued studying the language while he was headmaster of St. Xavier's High School/Lupungutu from 1957 until 1962. It was in the course of these seven years that he developed the habit of riding by bicycle to visit most of his pupils and their parents in their villages, one by one, to learn about their lives, their culture, their language. Initially meant for his own benefit he began to have index cards with him on these excursions on which he not only noted down Ho words and their denotations in English, but added other useful information in connection with that word (personal communication). The vocabulary collected on these cards plus the added notes containing information from the indigenous point of view constituted the foundation of the Ho-English dictionary to be published 50 years later. Maybe Deeney was inspired in his approach by Hoffman's *Encyclopaedia Mundarica* all the 16 volumes of which he had in his study in LPG, as the added data turn the Ho-English dictionary into an ethnological encyclopaedia of the socio-cosmic universe of the Ho in many respects. In it any references to sickness, spirits, rituals, 'folk beliefs' etc. are expressed as seen through the eyes of a Ho without Deeney himself holding such views as he points out in the introduction to the dictionary. After all, he is a scholar, not a 'going native' person.

Deeney began publishing on the world of the Ho and their language in the mid-seventies after an extended period of extensive research. After hosting an anthropologist in LPG and observing him interview elderly Ho informants

while tape-recording their talks Deeney approached Dhanur Singh Purty, a Ho graduate and former student of his. Their collaboration began in the early sixties by Dhanur interviewing and tape-recording his own father. Deeney recollects how amazed Dhanur was about his father's memory and knowledge. The recordings plus Dhanur's follow-up research in a number of villages in the heart of Kolhan plus Deeney's own research led to the publication between 1978 and 1982 of a seven volume encyclopaedia of more than 1000 pages on Ho village life, customs and culture entitled 'The Ho of the Ho Country' (*Ho disum Ho honko*). The process of writing up took almost twenty years. D.S. Purty is given as the author, Deeney writes the introduction. The text is written in the Ho language making use of the Devanagari script. Simultaneously Deeney and Dhanur began preparing the Ho-English dictionary containing the denotations in English of all Ho words that appear in the books of the series (see Reichel 2009 for the content of the seven volumes) enriched by detailed ethnographic information. The first edition of the Ho-English dictionary came out in 1978, the same year when the publication of the seven volumes began. Deeney claims that all 12000 entries of the dictionary plus those 900 added in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2005 have been filtered through Dhanur. I do not know any of Deeney's publications in which he does not emphasize his complete dependence on Dhanur at every stage of their work. Also, when I sometimes got stuck at home while writing up my thesis and I consulted him via email, his answers were always carefully argued and would usually begin by: "I have discussed your mail with Dhanur".

Dhanur also collaborated in the preparation of the "Ho Grammar and Vocabulary" which was published in 1975. Deeney hoped that everybody who is familiar with the Devanagari script will be able to read and understand the seven volumes written by Dhanur by making use of the Ho-English dictionary and the Ho grammar. When the Jesuit language instructors realized that for teaching purposes there should be a faster, more effective and less theoretical approach than that conveyed in the "Ho Grammar and Vocabulary", Deeney wrote a condensed "Introduction to the Ho Language" which was published in 1991. This booklet is a jewel, a survival kit of no

more than 50 pages. Although all of the language materials have been accompanying me throughout my fieldwork it was the "Introduction" of which I needed a second copy since my sweaty fingers due to the daily use in tropical climate had eaten up the letters. I still remember the first sentences: I drank rice-beer. She made/built a house. We ate cooked rice. They sowed the seed. You ploughed the field.

Deeney's latest publication from 2008 is "The Spirit world of the Ho Tribals. And other glimpses into the Ho world." It is a revised and updated collection of those hitherto unpublished essays that he had given to us in 2005 when we met for the first time (see above). This publication written in English draws heavily from the seven volumes written by Dhanur. Deeney had originally considered to translate these volumes into English or to have them translated with Dhanur's help, but they never found the time. Also, Dhanur had fallen victim to moneylenders in the meantime and did only irregularly turn up for work in LPG, as he felt the lives of his wife and his ten children to be threatened in his village. Deeney himself was 87 years now and getting weaker. Before running the risk of the contents of the seven volumes getting lost to many because they are written in Ho, this publication from 2008 then is the condensed result of Deeney's effort to make available in English to others in one book the Ho's relationship towards their deities, their *bongas* (the body of tutelary and malignant spirits), their ancestors - and other glimpses. Deeney calls it a book about the Ho's religious attitudes representing their own perspectives. As all the books have been regionally published with Xavier Ho Publications in LPG, Chaibasa and Ranchi, they unfortunately may be known and accessible only to a limited number of scholars dealing with tribal issues in middle India. In my book "The Dead in Tribal Middle India" (Manohar/Delhi, 2009) there is a chapter on the Ho and the concept of their ancestry and Deeney's/ Purty's contribution and research into that field. When I gave a copy to Deeney he was embarrassed and moved at the same time. "You know", he said, "no one beyond our region has so far paid published tribute to our work. Little is known about the world of the Ho in the academic world outside." Maybe he was right at that time. He had met and discussed with Serge Bouez, who published his

book on Ho and Santal in 1985 without reference to Deeney's material. He had enjoyed, he said, sitting with Michael Yorke and discuss aspects related to the Ho's *miyad mandi chaturenko*. In fact, Yorke quotes him and lists him in his references, but then his thesis has never been published and at that time, in 1976, only Deeney's Ho grammar had been out. Barbara Verardo did long term fieldwork among Ho and Munda people in the Ranchi area and was in touch with Yorke and M. Areeparampil from the TRTC in LPG. There is no reference to Deeney's material in her thesis, but they met, if only briefly (personal communication). Had he greeted her the way he greeted us when we met for the first time: "Good afternoon. I have no time for you?" Eventually, Deeney's language books are listed in the bibliography of D.S. Anderson's "The Munda Languages" (2008), but in the part introducing relevant publications on Munda languages all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Deeney's works are missing. While Das Gupta (2011) in her book on the Ho lists Deeney's "Ho-English Dictionary" from 1978(!), in her glossary of Ho terms she does not stick mit Deeney's transliteration. Pucilowski (2013), on the other hand, for her linguistic study in Ho morphophonology and morphosyntax makes extensive use of Deeney's grammar (2<sup>nd</sup> edition from 2002), but that was three years after his death.

### Epilogue

Had Deeney been given a Ho burial as he had wished? I was wondering. My question was confirmed, though, even a film of the burial procedure had been made entitled "Fr John Deeney, S.J., The Apostle of the Hos", a copy of which I was given. It was irritating, then, to see that the stone to cover the grave was not a *sasan diri* which is one chosen and transported from the jungle as would have been the Ho tradition. It was polished granite instead engraved with a large cross. It lay in an East-West and not in a North-South direction as is customary with Ho people. D.S. Purty who I met in 2012 called it a *diku diri* (alien/ foreign stone) and complained about the burial site. When digging the grave, he said, water flushed inside and could not be redirected. Ho people always offer their dead a good site, he continued, which by all means is a dry grave. He and his wife would be quite unhappy

to know Deeney to be exposed to such humidity for good. Those in charge of the burial site just would not listen when they were informed about the water leakage inside the grave. He and his wife could live with this knowledge only as they had done everything to prevent this from happening.

The John Deeney Memorial Centre in Chaibasa had been erected soon after Deeney's death. It had a library consisting of a few shelves with Deeney's and Dhanur's books that had been transferred from Deeney's study in LPG, and a larger room for seminars. When I was there in 2013 the place did not look used, some of the books and shelves were covered by cobwebs, others had been damaged by water or gnawed at by rats- an altogether poor sight as it conveyed the impression that there was no demand for the intellectual passion encapsulated in Deeney's and Dhanur's material. Obviously the wonderful library at the TRTC in Guira was suffering a similar fate. It was closed and locked most of the time when I went there in 2013. So many books had been stolen in the course of the years that this seemed the most effective way of rescuing the rest. A charming, polite and educated Ho girl from the vicinity was in charge of the key, had regular office hours which, of course, were not kept, and books could only be read under her constant supervision. Unaccompanied individual entry was disallowed. She had learnt how to use a computer in one of the courses run by the TRTC especially for the advancement of tribal girls and had produced a modern, computer-typed inventory of the books.

In my interpretation the active role that Deeney played within the community of the Jesuits and the way he was included in their day-to-day activities very much revolved around Deeney's personne and his scholarly commitment. Although a Jesuit and as such a member of a large community and a world-wide social net, as a scholar of the writing profession he at the same time was an isolated single individual, especially when Dhanur withdrew from the scene. The Jesuits of LPG and Chaibasa were working hard, disciplined and efficiently in order to advance the Ho tribals' material and spiritual well-being. This to them spells constructing and running Hindi medium schools and colleges, initiating a number of agricultural

development projects and irrigation schemes in the 'jungly' villages, and defending as lawyers free of charge Ho women and men when these are taken to court in cases of impending land dispossession. In my understanding Deeney's perspective on the Ho was different from that of his fellow Jesuits. He did not want to improve their lot, but to understand what constituted their Ho-ness and write about it, document it. He unconditionally respected Ho people, their tribalness, their religious beliefs, their tribal values for what they were, the way they were. He did not have this hidden developmental agenda.

Despite all the support I have received over the years from the LPG community for which I am very grateful, I have in the end decided against doing fieldwork in this environment. In the course of the discussions I had with Deeney over five years I realized that my focus should be on locally defined Ho priorities and local Ho perspectives. I became interested in observing how Ho communities, how Ho people are faring without the assistance of Catholic Church, social activists, Chaibasa academia, disciplined formal education, proselytizing activities of sorts and non-government organizations.

Eventually a suitable site less than 40 kilometres away from Chaibasa was found where these requirements were met. The chapter in this book "Narrations of Commitment: Friends in the Field" is about how this was accomplished. The relative spatial distance from the Chaibasa area meant the possibility of an alternative and rather unveiled entry into the Ho's universe, its relative closeness to the Chaibasa area meant that once in a while I could meet Deeney there by taking the public bus, the Chaibasa *gari*, which, however, always implied a horrible ride on horrible 'roads' and a constant fear of the bus overturning.

## References

The names in this text refer to the following books and authors:

- Areeparampil, Mathew 2002; *Struggle for Swaraj*. Lupungutu: Tribal Research and Training Centre.
- Bouez, Serge 1985; *Réciprocité et Hiérarchie. L'Alliance Chez Les Ho Et Les Santal De L'Inde*. Paris: Société D'Ethnographie.
- Das Gupta, Sanjukta 2011; *Adivasis and the Raj. Socio-economic Transition of the Hos, 1820-1932*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan.
- Deeney, John 2002; *Ho Grammar and Vocabulary* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Lupungutu: Xavier Ho Publications.
- 1991; *An Introduction to the Ho Language*. Chaibasa: Xavier Ho Publications.
- 2005; *Ho-English Dictionary*. Ranchi: Xavier Publications.
- 2008; *The Spirit World of the Ho Tribals*. Ranchi: Xavier Publications.
- Majumdar, Dharendra Nath 1950; *The Affairs of a Tribe. A Study in Tribal Dynamics*. Lucknow: Universal Publishers, The Mall.
- Pucilowski, Anna 2013 (unpubl. dissertation); *Topics In Morphomorphology And Morphosyntax*. University of Oregon.
- Purty, Dhanur Singh 1978 - 1982; *Ho Disum Ho Honko*. A series of 7 books in Ho language. Chaibasa: Xavier Ho Publications.
- Reichel, Eva 2009; *Notions of Life in Death and Dying. The Dead in Tribal Middle India*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Verardo, Barbara 2003 (unpubl. dissertation); *Rebels and Devotees of Jharkhand: Social, Religious and Political Transformations among the Adivasis of Northern India*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Yorke, Michael 1976 (unpubl. dissertation); *Decisions and Analogy: Political Structure and Discourse among the Ho Tribals of India*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies.

e. reichel

24.04.2016

