

Dharma Tour in Chattisgarh

by Vishvapani

I'm writing this in a jeep, literally bumping down mud roads in rural Chhattisgarh. I have joined a Dharma teaching tour by Indian and western Buddhists in a rural area, far from the main cities, where forty percent of the population is from dalit and other depressed communities and a movement of conversion to Buddhism is well under way. The people here are passionately devoted to Dr Ambedkar, many of the leaders are becoming Buddhists, and the villages are holding meetings to discuss conversion en masse. The Maharashtrians in our party are excited to be here, so far from the Ambedkarite heartlands, where their movement is just catching fire.

We've just pulled up in a large field and water hole with buffalo lying neck-deep in the water with a statue of Dr Ambedkar in a lush, green field. Then we drive a kilometer to the village – roughly built huts, the walls mostly made of mud, the more solid buildings of brick, beside a tranquil lake, and the sun shining down a sweltering heat. The entire village is there to meet us: two hundred people clustered in a gathering pace by the lake.

The men are dressed in simple shirts and slacks, many of the faces deeply weathered; the women are dressed in dramatic green and red saris, many with dramatic pink and red nose studs in both nostrils; the children are here as well, from the smallest to teens in smart blue and white school uniforms. You see the incredulity is in the faces: amazement that people should come from so far away to their village – in fact, that anyone at all would come here. They warm to the speakers as each in turn expresses their admiration for Dr Ambedkar and the warmth of the reception. It's true: their faces shine as with joy – though mixed with surprise and perplexity. One man towards the back stares at me as if to say 'What's that?'

Most of these people are Satnamis – followers of 'the true name': a sect founded by a local teacher called Garsidas in the late 18th century. It is an anti-caste bhakti movement (i.e. devotionally based – because social differences disappear in the face of Truth) numbering three or four million people in this region. They are nominally Hindu, but they have rejected so many Hindu beliefs and practices that they see themselves more as an independent tradition. Followers these days think that Garsidas' teaching has much in common with Buddhism: indeed, some scholars trace a line from the last of the Buddhist siddhas to the first of the Hindu bhaktas, culminating in figures like Garsidas.

The great link is Dr Ambedkar, and the fact that he advocated conversion to Buddhism is now impacting on these people. They knew nothing of him in his lifetime: illiterate and far from external communications they knew of little beyond their own community. That

changed in the 1980s when Kanshi Ram, the founder of the BSP, a political party representing the poorest people, visited the area, bringing news of Dr Ambedkar's achievements and legacy. A dalit who became the country's first law minister and framed laws against caste discrimination (though of course you can't outlaw the attitudes that go along with it). Several people here tell me that for them Dr Ambedkar is a Messiah, a saviour who embodies all their aspirations and showed them a way forward.

Kanshi Ram was largely responsible for spreading awareness of Dr Ambedkar beyond Maharashtra, to many groups like the Chhatishgari Satnami's, and for taking his work forward in the political sphere. In a country whose rulers are still overwhelmingly Brahmins, the BSP actually joined the government. But we have just heard that he died – the day before we arrived on 8th October. It is a shock to these people, but not a surprise, as he had been ill for two years, and at every meeting we hold a two minute silence.

Only five percent of the Satnami community have actually become Buddhists so far, but this includes some very active and determined people, including a singer who has accompanied us on two of our programmes. He recites the words first in a rolling, emphatic, strongly rhymed poetry, sounding like Jamaican dub. I can pick out a few key words: 'Bhagawan Buddha', 'Babasaheb Ambedkar'. Then he sings the same words, in a vibrant, modulated harmony, adding to them improvised lines and repetitions. He sways and the audience nod with pleasure.

There's a rich culture here, for all the absence of education and the community's isolation, but it is being transformed as these people move towards Buddhism. Traditionally religious teachers would sing verses from the Ramayan followed by commentaries on the meaning. But in recent years many people have turned against the ancient text because of its caste connotations, and new epics have been composed: the Bhimayana, which tells the life of Bhimrao Ambedkar ('Bhim' for short) and the Buddhayana, recounting the life of the Buddha.

I ask a schoolteacher if they see conflict between the Satnami tradition and Buddhism. 'Both teach equality and both were against caste,' he replies. 'We love our teacher, Guruji, but the Satnami way has done nothing to help our people out of their suffering. Babasaheb Ambedkar has helped, so we have great faith in him. Buddhism shows how to live a good life and it has always opposed caste, so now we have faith in the Buddha.'

Another man joins the conversation, who is dressed in flowing yellow and red robes and has mantras tattooed across his forehead. He tells me that he is a former Ramnami, a breakaway from the Satnami movement devoted to reciting the name of Ram. 'I still bear the marks of a Ramnami, but I am a follower of Bhagawan Buddha, and I have traveled

to every state in India to see how the followers of Dr Ambedkar's movement are working to spread Dhamma.' I compliment him on his magnificent white beard and he tells me, 'When I travel in the train I tell them I am a Buddhist holy man and point to my beard. They say 'Buddhists shouldn't steal – buy a ticket!' But I say, I am not stealing, I am just traveling, and usually they let me stay on the train.'

I worry several times during the tour if that this seems too much like a missionary tour, but there is little sense here that something is being imposed from outside. I have used the word 'conversion' throughout this blog, but in fact they tell me they are not Hindus. Some say they have no religion; others follow teachers who they now consider to be in sympathy with Dr Ambedkar and the Buddha.

There is much more I could write about my three-day trip to Chattisgarh, but communications have been so difficult that I will only be able to manage this single report. But I am pleased to have gone. Not far south is a heartland of the Naxalite insurgency: a Maoist guerrilla insurgency that spreads across India and uses bandit tactics to oppose caste and social inequality. Whole districts not far away are in Naxalite hands, and the scale of the revolt is gradually being appreciated by Indians and outsiders. The poverty is so intense and the injustice of caste so palpable, that this is no surprise. It throws Dr Ambedkar's importance and his espousal of non-violence into sharper relief still. The villages and towns that are turning to Buddhism are the heart of India, and a change is taking place there: a teaching of equality, dignity, and helping the community, all embodied in the bespectacled figure of the most unlikely-looking messiah: Dr Ambedkar.

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