

Gypsies embracing Buddhism: A step forward for Building a Harmonious Society in Europe

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Social Situation of Gypsy (Roma) People in Europe

I had first discussion about Gypsies at Frankfurt, Germany in September 2006 A.D. Among my Information Technology Professional colleagues: three were from Slovakia and one was German. I was the only Indian and it was my first time in Europe. It was a general discussion where people told me what they can find in the Slovakian big city of Bratislava.

To add more information, the first Slovak person said, “In Slovakia you can also find lot of Gypsies.” Then he laughed. After hearing this I was quite puzzled because at that time I did not know what Gypsy means. A quick response from the second Slovak was, “You should dump all of them in a dustbin.” I saw lot of anger on his face. The third Slovak laughed a lot. The German guy who always kept quite in our general discussions, this time very actively said, “Hitler killed them a lot, Pravin”. Also he justified the killings saying that, “Pravin, they are lazy people.”

Initially I could not understand who the Gypsies are because I was new in Europe and did not have much knowledge about their society. As a Buddhist convert I come from the similar socially-excluded and highly-oppressed Avarna-Untouchables Society in India, so I could quickly understand the tremendous hate in the minds of the ‘well-educated’ Information Technology Professionals towards Gypsies. This was a big surprise for me and a lifelong-reason for the research on Gypsies. All of the colleagues were good to me and always wanted information about India. We worked well together; also, I could become friends with of all. Still, though, this conversation had a deep impact on my mind. I could see a difficult social situation, the prejudice and the hate in European society that exists towards Gypsies, even among the well-educated and well-earning class in 21st century.

Local and State-Supported anti-Gypsyism in Hungary, a chapter in the research paper published by Laszlo Kurti¹ in 2000 A.D. states: “There are, however, other equally troublesome developments which must be mentioned for they reinforce both the existence and the perception of deep-seated mistreatment and racism facing Gypsies from local Government and state officials. Some of these actions are clearly racially motivated attacks on Gypsies by locals who 'defend' their (now), private property from Gypsies. Two cases will serve to illustrate this type of intolerance. In the first instance, a non-Gypsy farmer decided to protect his property by using his rifle to shoot at the intruders in a regional town, Torokbalint, on August 7, 1995; the other case receiving national media attention was an electrocution when a property owner induced high-voltage into the fence surrounding his property in the northern town of Sajokaza on July 29, 1997. In the former case the Budapest Court rules that the Gypsy family not only wanted to steal fruit but also threatened the life of the owner by attacking him and, thus, he was using his weapon legally to defend his life. The court also admitted that it saw no reason for dealing with the case on a racial or ethnic basis and dismissed the charges. The second case is far from over but it seems

¹ Laszlo Kurti, Right-wing Extremism, Skinheads and anti-Gypsy Sentiments in Hungary, 2000 AD
<http://rss.archives.ceu.hu/archive/00001096/01/102.pdf>

that similar arguments will be brought up in defense of the property owner even though a young Gypsy intruder was electrocuted.”

While surveying the difficult situation of the Gypsies of Kosovo in October 1999 A.D. Paul Polansky writes²: “My translator was Hisen Gashnjani, a Kovachi Rom who befriended me in the Krushevac camp. Although many Roma and Hashkalija recognized him immediately as a Gypsy, his skin color was not always our passport to enter their community until he declared that he was a "maxhupi." In the Lipjan community of Mali Alas our request for an interview with the Hashkalija leader there was actually turned down despite the fact that we had driven up in a UNHCR marked car. These Hashkalija were desperate people who had received no food aid since the war and had suffered a hand grenade attack only three days earlier. They were not prepared to talk to outsiders until Hisen told the Hashkalija leader that he too was a "maxhupi." Then we were readily accepted and invited in for tea.

The most depressing part of this survey was to find so many Roma/Hashkalija (the great majority) in such deplorable conditions. In Prishtine, I found more than 30 families who out of fear of being kidnapped and killed had not left their homes in more than seven months. In the Peje district, I found most families still being threatened with death by their neighbors if they didn't leave the country immediately. At one Hashkalija farmhouse in Brezhanik we heard three land mines go off during the hour we were there, as a warning, we were later told, that our visit was not welcomed by the local Albanians. In Dobroqana (Gjilan) I found a family who was always stoned if they went out shopping, while in Obilich and in many other communities the Roma and Hashkalija are turned away by local shops.” Further Paul Plansky writes, “Attempts to get food aid to Roma and Hashkalija communities have also been thwarted by Serbs who on numerous occasions have threatened Albanian drivers working for aid agencies. In the community of Plemetina, food aid for the Roma there was stopped for several months when local Serbs refused to let ration cards be handed out to the Roma because these cards were written in English and Albanian.”

In World War II, millions of Gypsies were killed along with the Jews. This fact is highly ignored in the European Society. They did not receive any compensation or proper rehabilitation. The old nomad Gypsies have settled in the same Ghetto areas. Gypsy Ghettos have transformed into villages. Large scale stereotypes still exists that Gypsies are criminals, they always lie, etc. They are segregated in schools and even in public life like the Avarna-Scheduled Castes (Untouchables) in India were. Gypsies are highly illiterate and have very high rate of unemployment. One can find the local and state sponsored discrimination is still present in the European Society.

Social Composition of Gypsies

Gypsies are identified as Roma People or Romani. They have their own social as well as regional identities and identities given by non-Gypsy people. They have several castes and tribes of their own since centuries.

Dr. Angus Fraser writes³: “On the Continent, the old established Gypsies have a variety of names for themselves, such as *cale* (=blacks) in Spain and southern France and *kaale* in Finland, *Sinti* in Germany, and *manouches* in France”. There are also Gypsy tribes as *Kalderash* and *Tzigane* in Hungary. They are also known as *Zigeuner* in Germany, *Gitano* in Spain, *Maxhupi* and *Hashkalija* in Kosovo. Many

² Paul Polansky, The Gypsies of Kosovo, <http://www.kosovo.net/gypsies.html>

³ Dr. Angus Fraser, The Gypsies, p. 8

such caste or tribes are commonly known as Gypsies and now Roma People. Because of their distinct cultural identity and in some cases due to darker skin color they are separate from the mainstream European Society, especially in Eastern Europe.

Comparison with Avarna People of India

While doing the research in India Paul Polansky found many Indian Avarna-Nomadic Tribes and Avarna-Scheduled Castes (Untouchables) have close similarity with the Gypsies of Europe. To summarize few examples⁴: “These are the Indian tribes I found that most closely resemble the Gypsies I know in Europe:

- LOHAR - Itinerant blacksmiths who used to be great warriors making their own weapons. Legend has it they originated in Chittorgarh but were defeated in the siege of that city in 1308. They then became nomadic. They are most famous for their beautiful wagons, the only Gypsy tribe today in India who still have their wagons. Many of the other tribes/castes listed below followed the Lohars on foot or with just a donkey or mule. In 1322 the first Gypsies were documented in Eastern Europe.
- DOM - one of the few original Dravidian tribes of India, these people became nomadic after the invasion of the Aryans around 1,500 B.C. Although the Dom once had forts and were famous for their cavalry, they were designated as the lowest caste under the Aryans and became wandering dancers and musicians. Most of the following tribes are sub-caste of the Dom.
- BAWARI - known as a nomadic, predatory tribe, the Bawari still to this day make signs on houses, gates, or alongside the road that can only be read by their own tribe informing them of conditions in the area. Many of these same signs were used by the European Gypsies up to the 1950s.
- BADU - a small tribe in Kashmir who tamed and led bears. In the last century their dress was the most similar to the European Gypsies.
- MEOS - famed cattle rustlers whose activities and customs closely resembled the Indian Gypsies who settled in England.
- BERIA - a sub-caste of the Dom, this is the tribe whose women read palms and tell fortunes.
- GOPAL - nomadic tent dwellers who earn their living as wrestlers in local fairs. Many European Romany were famous as wrestlers and their descendants today can always be found in Olympic wrestling teams.
- BANSBERIA - famous in India as pole vaulters over animals in village fairs. The first bullfighters on foot in Spain were reputed to be Gypsies who also pole vaulted over charging bulls in the bullring.
- KANJAR - one of the more despicable tribes of India because they prostitute their women. Their name has become synonymous for "pimp".
- SANSE - closely related to the Kanjar, the Sansi were one of the most famous criminal tribes of India during the colonization by the British.
- GANDHILA - one of the lowest castes of India, they are well known as itinerant sharpeners of scissors and knives, a profession followed by many European Gypsies.
- BILOCH - camp followers of the Lohar who transported their supplies. They are reputed to have a Persian origin.
- KIKAN - famous horse breeders whose origins can be traced back to Iran, this tribe arrived with the invading Islamic armies in the 11th century. Known for their

⁴ Paul Polansky, Original Research on Gypsies, <http://www.paulpolansky.nstemp.com/original%20research.html>

predatory ways, they were expelled from the Lahore area in the 12th century and then joined other nomadic, criminal tribes before leaving India almost en mass with Lohars in the 14th century. The Kikans brought to India the story of Abraham. According to them, Sarah, Abraham's wife, was a Kikan. In many European countries, Gypsies are called Tsikans.”

Gypsies and Religions

Wherever Gypsies migrated they practiced dominant religion of the region such as Christianity and Islam. Still they have preserved their distinct cultural identity and could not be integrated with the mainstream society.

Though Gypsies practice Christianity or Islam the discrimination continues within those faiths. Paul Polansky says about Gypsies in Kosova⁵, that: “It is not only the local Albanians who are discriminating against the Roma and Hashkalija but also the major aid agencies in Kosova. In Obilich, Kosovo Polje, Lipjan and many other districts I found Mother Teresa Society openly refusing to deliver food to "Gypsies." Islamic Relief also seems to have a policy of not providing aid to Gypsies although the Roma and Hashkalija are Muslim. Even at Oxfam, who have done more for the Roma and Hashkalija than any other aid agency in Kosova, deliveries to minorities are sometimes delayed for long periods by local Albanian staff. Urgent requests for food aid for hungry Gypsy families made to several major aid agencies months ago have gone unfulfilled. Although the Roma and Hashkalija are the second largest minority in Kosova (and may soon be the largest minority at the rate the Serbs are leaving) no aid agency including UNHCR and OSCE have hired a Kosovar Rom or Hashkalija although many speak passable English.”

One must note that when Muslims migrated to India in between 8th till 11th Century they came with an Islamic identity as Muslims. When Gypsy caravans with thousands of people migrated to Europe after 11th century they went without any Hindu Identity. They carried their Caste or Tribal identity including beef eating habits. Savarna Hindus prohibited beef eating habit as a religious transition long before 11th century A.D. especially after 4th century A.D. under the Gupta Rulers period.⁶ But Avarna Caste and Tribes in India like the Gypsies continued the beef eating habits till 20th century and still some Castes and Tribes continue.

Gypsies in Hungary Embracing Buddhism

The year 2006-2007 marked the 2550th Celebration of Vesak year and in India it also marked the 50th Dhamma-Diksha day of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who revived Buddhism. To attend one of such celebration Janos Orsos a Gypsy from Hungary visited India in December 2005 – January 2006 A.D. later embraced Buddhism.

Janos Orsos writes his experience⁷, as: “After one month in India, I came back convinced that I was a Buddhist. On a very big retreat in Nagpur for 5,000 people, in January 2006, I had become a Dhammamitra, publicly declaring that the Buddha is my teacher, that I will practice the five precepts, and that TBMSG/FWBO is my spiritual family. But back here in Hungary, there were only Hungarian Buddhists, and I could not identify with them. However, people from the Western Buddhist Order/Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, both Europeans and Indians, came to stay

⁵ Paul Plansky, The Gypsies of Kosova, <http://www.kosovo.net/gypsies.html>

⁶ Dr. Ambedkar B.R Writings and Speeches Volume No. 7, The Untouchables: Who were they and how they become

⁷ Janos Orsos, Following in Babasaheb's Footsteps, <http://www.jaibhim.hu/janos-orsos-following-in-babasahebs-footsteps>

with us and they were completely different from the Hungarian Buddhists. It took me some time to work out what kind of a movement the FWBO in Europe is, because these were white intellectual people who took to Buddhism for reasons that I could not really understand. But they were different from the Hungarian Buddhists I had met, because they were genuinely concerned with social questions. When they come to Hungary they spend time with us, which Hungarian Buddhists don't do. They have become our friends and the connection between us is very good.

However, I feel that I am much more closely identified with Indian Buddhism. That is why our own new and independent religious organization wears the name of 'Jai Bhim'. The name gives a message: it means that we belong to India. We have found a new framework for our twenty-year-old movement for gypsy education. We began to believe that we too can take our movement in our own hands and run it ourselves, just as our Indian brothers and sisters do. Our experiences over the last twenty years fit well with the Ambedkarite movement. Our Indian friends started fifty years ago and they have big results. So we feel it is worth us starting out on the same path. We have found that Dr. Ambedkar's thinking fits well with our aims, so we have named our new school, 'Dr. Ambedkar High School'.

I feel very pleased that I can speak in Europe about Dr. Ambedkar. Nobody in Europe has heard for him, so it is one of our major tasks to speak about him. It is very wonderful for me to see that my actions find parallels in Dr. Ambedkar's activity and movement. We have found ourselves going through the same steps as our Indian friends, because these are the logical steps in our social situation. Our Indian Buddhist friends are able to take their own institutions in their own hands because they have their own hero."

About Gandhi Janos writes as, "We need the image of Dr. Ambedkar because we are still invisible to society. For instance, my white colleagues are not as good at teaching our gypsy students as I am, for obvious reasons. But it is always the white people who are known about. For instance, it is well known in Hungary that the Buddhist Church is active in the gypsy field, especially at the Little Tiger High School in Alsosantmarton, in Southern Hungary. But whenever the school is talked about in the Alsosantmarton media nobody notices the gypsy activists who work there without money, even though these activists get excellent educational results, usually better than the white teachers. But we are not noticed. The white Buddhist authorities are highly visible because they 'sacrificed their lives' going to the gypsies - the biggest sacrifice that one can make! They become famous as heroes and saviors - but we are nowhere. And this is the story of Dr. Ambedkar. In Europe people have heard about the untouchables and how Gandhi almost sacrificed his life for them - everyone knows this in Europe. I have nothing against Gandhi, I respect him. He is a real hero for India. But what did Dr. Ambedkar do? Wasn't he a participant in this movement? Nobody knows about him because he is the gypsy. This is a very easy parallel for me to make."

Further Janos adds, "That task is running social and educational institutions for gypsies - and for us this is Buddhism. We don't judge ourselves by how much time we spend meditating. For us our educational work is effective when people become aware of their own minds. Our goal is to help people to be aware of the potential within their minds. We help them to grow out of their ghetto world, within a Buddhist framework. Through us the students can meet Buddhism. These youngsters will easily identify themselves with the ideas and the vision that helps them. It may not be that every member of our schools or our movement will take to Buddhism, and they certainly won't to begin with. This was the case for me too. What was interesting

for me when I first came across the followers of Dr. Ambedkar in India was not Buddhism but the social movement. I connected first with that movement and the people in it. No doubt it will be like that for others too.”

Janos carries pride of setting up a Buddhist Church, “The Jai Bhim Religious Network⁸ is an ecclesiastical organization, legally speaking. We have founded a church! Of course it’s not usual to found a church and this particular church has no precedent in Hungary. There are new Christian groups forming new churches in Hungary in a Protestant context, but these Christian churches belong to sects that operate outside Hungary. Ours however, is a Buddhist church. We have done that, firstly, because of our Buddhist convictions. Second we have founded a Buddhist church because the Christian groups and churches ignored and neglected the education of poor people. They do deal with poverty, at least if it concerns old people or ill people - but if it is about gypsy families it is not important to them. We have founded an autonomous church, which is not under any other denomination or ideology, although it is linked to TBMSG/FWBO. This is the first church in Hungary set up by gypsies for gypsies. There are Pentecostal gypsy churches, but they are just segregated versions of the Hungarian churches and the leadership and organizers are all Hungarians. The gypsies need the authorization of the Hungarians to organize anything. But this church is ours.”

Istvan Lazi another young Hungarian Gypsy convert with a Buddhist name, Asok, writes his experience⁹, as: “I spent two weeks in a Buddhist camp for gypsy children at Uszo Retreat Centre. It was a good camp and I found it very interesting. An American Buddhist lady wanted me to say some words before lunch one day - and she said I did it very well. So that was my first connection with Buddhism. Janos and Tibor, the Buddhists who had encouraged me to go to the hostel, came regularly to our hostel, but the director did not really want them to be there and made it difficult for them. However, I remained in continuous contact with them by phone and email.”

Further Istvan adds, “The Buddhist way of thinking became more and more interesting for me, not as a religion but as a way of thinking. For instance I liked the Jatakas when I read them in a translation by Tibor. Meditation I did not like until I received some instruction in how to do it properly. When Janos and Tibor came back from India in 2006 they told us they had become Dhammamitras, making a definite commitment to Buddhism and identifying themselves with TBMSG/FWBO. I felt attracted to that, so Tibor asked why not write to Subhuti and ask him if you can become one too. And I am very pleased that I did become a Dhammamitra. My friends teased me that now you are a Buddhist you can’t eat meat or kill mosquitoes. So I asked Subhuti, does a real Buddhist meditate every day? He said that it is not obligatory. I asked him about eating meat and he said it is still difficult to avoid in Hungary.”

The example of Buddhist in India inspires Istavan, “I am proud of my Indian Buddhist friends. It is only 50 years since their conversion and it is impressive what they have done in that time. I know that the caste system is not legal any more and that it exists nevertheless, so there is a lot of work still to do. I wish them the courage and strength to keep going till the task is done. I want even more people from ‘low’ castes to prove that they are like people from higher castes.”

These developments also received opposition within Hungarian Society and Janos writes as, “There are many people who are deeply critical of us, even who hate

⁸Janos Orsos, Jai Bhim Religious Network, <http://www.jaibhim.hu>, <http://www.ambedkar.eu/>

⁹ Istvan Lazi, Leaving the Ghetto, <http://www.ambedkar.eu/istvan-lazi-leaving-the-ghetto>

us; there are many people who revere us; and there are many people who are jealous of us. People ask, 'Are these gypsies real Buddhists? How can you teach Buddhism to gypsies?' What we are doing is so strange in Europe, where Buddhism is largely the leisure hobby of the middle classes. People say, 'Isn't Buddhism a luxury for gypsies in villages?' Some of these comments come from Christians - but it is easy for us to answer them: they don't offer effective secondary education for gypsies and we do! But whatever people say, it doesn't bother us - we just carry on with our work."

In 2007 A.D. Jai Bhim Religious Network founded by Janos Orsos in Hungary conducted a major Dhammadiksha Ceremony according to Dr. Ambedkar Tradition where many Gypsies converted to Buddhism.

Harmonious co-existence of Gypsies and non-Gypsies

The principal of the Dr. Ambedkar High School is a white Hungarian Derdak Tibor. Tibor is former member of the Hungarian parliament and has become a Buddhist. He supports the social, educational and spiritual development of the Gypsy friends. With many difficulties including financial ones the Jai Bhim network is able to run the Dr. Ambedkar High School on their own.

Zsuzsanna Dome, a young Hungarian woman from Budapest also affectionately and respectfully known as Dada Suzi, is active participant of the Jai Bhim Network. She works with Dr. Ambedkar High School in Hegymeg, Sayokaza, as well as Ozd as a history teacher.

Many European and American Buddhists support the Jai Bhim Network, Sajokaza founded by Janos Orsos in Hungary. Several members of the Western Buddhist Order in Europe visit and participate in the activities of the Jai Bhim Network to give them support. Ann Dennehy, Creative Director of Jai Bhim International¹⁰ from America has visited Dr. Ambedkar School, Sajokaza, Hungary. The Jai Bhim network effectively used internet to posts their updates and could reach wider audience around the world.

In May 2009 A.D. when Jai Bhim Network celebrated Buddha Day and also brought Gypsies and non-Gypsies together on the Buddhist platform. Hungarian Buddhists from Budapest Buddhist University¹¹ participated in the event. In the words of Jai Bhim Network official website¹², "In the evening we talked about Buddhism, humanity, empathy, respect for each other and the inner harmony with The Gate of Dharma Buddhist College's teachers and students. We listened to the scientific lectures from Ruzsa Ferenc, the chief director of The Gate of Dharma Buddhist College and from Körtvélyesi Tibor. The day ended with meditation, by Száraz Róbert."

The Gypsies (Romani) who have gifted a great musical culture to the European Society are facing difficult social situation and day by the state is degrading. Historically they did not colonize any European territory with violence and never did organized barbaric acts against any community. It is true that harsh social conditions, prejudice in European society, social injustice, and unemployment have made some Gypsy people as Criminals. Crime can not be generalized and whole community can not be blamed because thieves and crime exists in every society. Paul Polansky's view about Gypsies is, "Although I was warned never to enter these tent cities, I found the same happy, gregarious, generous people that I knew as Gypsies in Europe. They not only entertained me with their music, but also their stories."

¹⁰ Ann Dennehy, <http://www.jaibhiminternational.org>

¹¹ Budapest Buddhist University, <http://www.tkbh.hu/ENGLISH/index.php>

¹² Jai Bhim Network Celebrated Buddha Birth, <http://www.jaibhim.hu/celebreted-buddha%E2%80%99s-birth>

Like Avarna People of India; Gypsies are surviving in oppressed conditions in Europe but they have chosen Buddha's path to bring the change following the footsteps of Dr. Ambedkar.

Buddhism is helping cultural integration of Gypsies and non-Gypsies without violent conflict. The Buddhist teachings are transforming the people. The five precepts have become central practice for the Gypsy converts and they are changing many old habits. The self realization and confidence to change the society based on Buddhist virtues among the Gypsy converts is a beginning of a peaceful revolution in Hungary and Europe. Dr. Ambedkar High School and Jai Bhim Religious Network for Gypsies by Gypsies are functioning based on Buddhist values. Gypsy and non-Gypsy people are coming together on a Buddhist platform. This is certainly a positive change for the harmonious co-existence in the European Society.