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VIJAY PRASHAD

Bhagwan Das (1927-2010). His life was given over to the fight against caste and untouchability, and towards the promotion of Buddhism.

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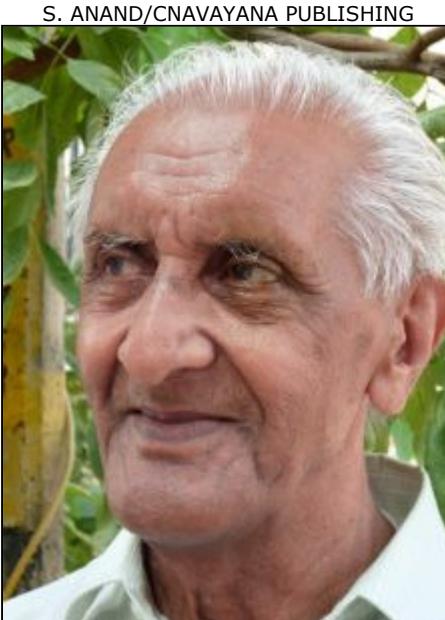
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Bhagwan Das outside his residence at Munirka in Delhi, in 2009.

During the monsoon season of 1991, I began my dissertation research in Delhi. I always knew that the project was going to be hard: to write the history of the Balmiki community of North India. In graduate school at the University of Chicago I studied with Barney Cohn, who guided me deftly into the study of a "people without history". Nothing about the Balmiki community was without history, but its absence in the archives made writing the history difficult. Unlike commercial communities whose archives resided in their transaction documents and unlike royal families whose archives slumbered in palaces and in war notes, the "untouchables" of India did not seem to have their own archives, and only rarely made an appearance in history books.

My work began in the National Archives of India, where my friend Prabhu Mohapatra led me into the Revenue papers. Here, in the margins, I found a lot of information on the Chuhra community of Punjab – the people whose hard labour made Punjab's fields flower. I also went out to the various colonies where the Balmiki

community lived: in the Bhangi colony on Mandir Marg and in the Old City, along its walls. One evening, near Kalan Masjid, a community elder handed me a slip of paper that had a name and a number written on it. He told me to call the number and go and see the man.

A few days later, I called the number and asked to speak to Bhagwan Das. In less than a minute a man came on the line. He spoke with what sounded vaguely like an American accent. Very courteously he asked me to see him a few days later. Bhagwan Das lived in a modest housing complex in Munirka. His unpretentious apartment was filled with books and magazines, all well read.

One of the first questions I asked him was about his accent. He laughed, a bit startled by my abruptness, and told me about his childhood near Shimla, in the Jutogh cantonment. English came to him not from the colonial overlords, but in the 1940s when he encountered U.S. airmen during his service on the Burma front during the Second World War. We chatted about the American troops, and he told me that he had befriended a few African-Americans among them. He was curious about racial discrimination and they were interested in his Dalit community (a U.S. air force report in the 1940s noted, "Native persons here are of a dark race and the Negro fails to respect their rights and privacy"; certainly the airmen that Bhagwan Das met did not respect his privacy, but they did honour his rights). These evenings in Bhagwan Das' house were my apprenticeship.

Many scholars came through Bhagwan Das' Munirka flat. He offered us his encyclopaedic knowledge and his kind wisdom. When I heard he had died on November 18, I was reminded of his calm intelligence and his kindness. Born in 1927 in the Jutogh cantonment, Bhagwan Das came of age in the shadow of B.R. Ambedkar, whom he met for the first time in 1943 in Shimla. Ambedkar drew him into the Scheduled Castes Federation and into working for him as a research assistant between 1955 and 1956. Finishing his law degree, Bhagwan Das went to work at the High Court. This was his job. His life was given over to the fight against untouchability and caste, and towards the promotion of Buddhism.

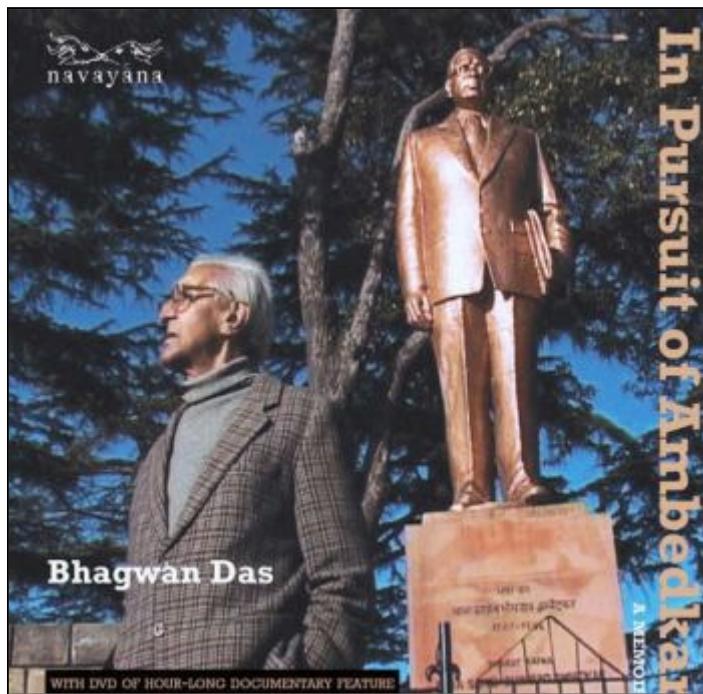
Bhagwan Das helped found the World Conference of Religions for Peace (Kyoto, 1970), along with the remarkable American Gandhian, Homer Jack. In 1983, he spoke before the United Nations on the vice of untouchability. He pointed out that India has an enlightened Constitution, what many in his circle called "Dr. Ambedkar's Constitution. Nevertheless, Bhagwan Das told the U.N., "Anything which the untouchables consider good for them is vehemently resisted and opposed. Whatever goes to make them weak, dispirited, disunited and dependent is encouraged." It was a powerful presentation.

Bhagwan Das was also a leading figure in making sure that the Dalit issue was not seen only in its domestic context, but taken in an Asian and global framework. In 1998, he was central to the creation of the International Dalit Convention (Kuala Lumpur) and had a role in the Dalit presence at the World Conference Against Racism (Durban, 2001). I had presented a paper at the U.N. conference on Dalit oppression in the global context, a talk that greatly pleased him (it was later published in a volume in honour of Eleanor Zelliot, titled *Claiming Power from Below*, by Oxford University Press). At the time of his death, Bhagwan Das was working on a book on untouchability in Asia.

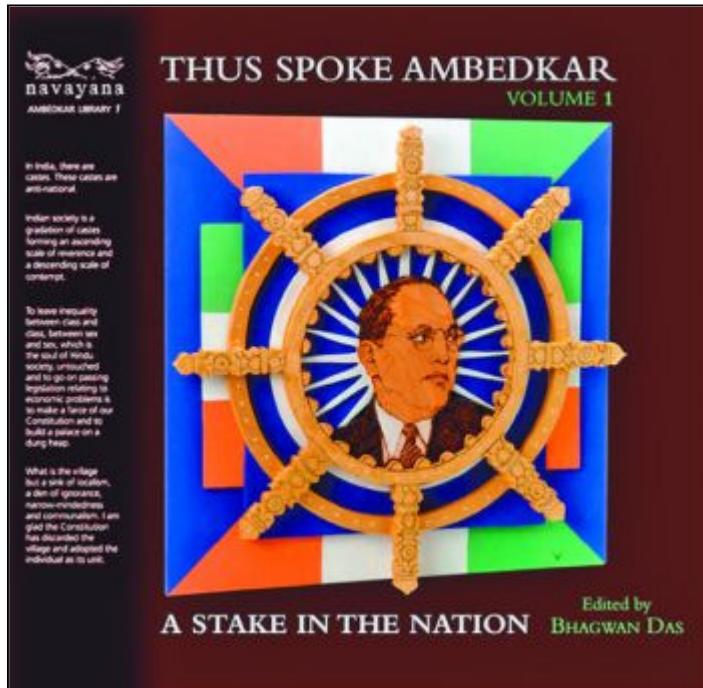
I went to see Bhagwan Das several times during the early 1990s. He had a remarkable memory: one day, in 1993 (as my notes tell me), he fired off a series of names of people I should meet: Kanhayya Lal, Bhagwan Din, Narain Din, Kalyan Chand, Shiv Charan, and so on. Each name came with a story. Bhagwan Das did not have to consult any paper or notes; he had their names and their biographies at his fingertips. It was exhilarating. What kind of idea was this that a "people have no history"!

Bhagwan Das was a living historian and his autobiography, *Mein Bhangi Hoon* (I am a Bhangi, 1976), provided a window into the life and lineage of one person who fought against the idea that he had no history. A part of his story is available from Navayana as *In Pursuit of Ambedkar*, 2010. I read his works eagerly. He also taught me how to create my archive. The state might have only put the Chuhra and the Balmiki into marginal notes; but the people were less dismissive of their own histories. In plastic bags, and wrapped in rope, under beds and in steel trunks, he said, there were documents galore; and indeed this was the case. The most precious papers that tell the history of the Balmiki community were not found in the National Archives but in the humble homes from northern Punjab to western Uttar Pradesh.

One day Bhagwan Das said to me, get out of Delhi. Go to Punjab. That is where the trick will be uncovered. He sent me to meet Lahori Ram Balley, the remarkable leader of Buddhist Publishing House at Phagwara Gate in Jalandhar. Lahori Ram told me the story of the Scheduled Caste Federation of Punjab and handed me an invaluable pamphlet by Fazul Hussain (*Achutuddhar aur Hindu asksariyat ke mansube*, Lahore, 1930).



"IN PURSUIT OF Ambedkar" tells a part of Bhagwan Das' story. The first volume of "Thus Spoke Ambedkar" was strongly criticised by the press, said Bhagwan Das. "We expected it and in fact welcomed the criticism," he wrote in the second volume, "because we believe nobody kicks a dead dog."



Lahori Ram had encouraged Bhagwan Das' intellectual and political work. Both were followers of Ambedkar. In the 1960s, the two friends would publish a series of books of Ambedkar's speeches, *Thus Spoke Ambedkar* (edited with superb introductions by Bhagwan Das; the first in 1964). The second volume opened with a poem by Khalil Gibran, demonstrating the open-mindedness of these men. They were not bilious like those dominant caste intellectuals; nor were they prone to compromise. The first volume was strongly criticised by the press, Bhagwan Das recollects. "We expected it and in fact welcomed the criticism," he wrote in the second volume, "because we believe nobody kicks a dead dog. All great ideas have to pass through three stages namely ridicule, discussion and finally acceptance." They were at the first stage. The next was before them.

The generosity of Bhagwan Das and his friends never ceased to astonish me. Lahori Ram and Bhagwan Das also sent me off to meet the leaders of the Balmiki community in Jalandhar and Ludhiana, and later, in Shimla. The trick was here. I had not noticed it. They knew where they were leading me. It was the classic matter of the novice historian being led by the intellectual engagé.

Just outside Jalandhar, in a Balmiki-dominated village, I spent several nights. One went poorly. It was cold, and I was not keen on the bed. I went for a walk just before dawn. In the field I saw a light flickering, and went toward it. There I saw an old man lighting a set of lamps and placing them in a set of pigeon-holes. He was in what might have been a trance. I watched him, and then retreated. The next morning I asked him what he was doing. He told me about Bala Shah Nuri and Lal Beg, the preceptors of the Chuhras, the great faith of his people that had been obliterated in the 1930s. It was in this decade that the Chuhras had been force-marched into Hinduism and encouraged to forget their own religion and customs. This was the trick.

I went back to Delhi. Bhagwan Das knew I had found it out when I walked into his door (it must have been in March 1993). He handed me his book, *Valmiki Jayanti aur Bhangi Jati*, which laid out part of the story. Later, I found Amichand Pandit's *Valmiki Prakash*

(1936), which was a catechism for the Chuhras; and I found Youngson's collection of Lalbeg songs in The Indian Antiquary (1906).

Bhagwan Das appreciated how we had together uncovered a forgotten story: how his community's deep cultural traditions had been vanquished by the Hindu Mahasabha and conservative sections of the Congress – eager as they were to increase the numbers of "Hindus" against "Muslims". It was a tragedy for the Chuhras, the Lalbegs, the Bala Shahis: they now became second-class Hindus. It is from this kind of reduction that human dignity shudders. It was also out of this history that Bhagwan Das followed Ambedkar to Buddhism; better a new religion than one loved than an enforced one that treated you as beneath contempt.

The generations before us loved poetry. It is something that we have lost to our own discredit. To make a point, and to do so in an unexpected way, they would often offer up a couplet or a line of poetry. It was very graceful. Bhagwan Das loved poetry. He particularly liked to talk with me about the verse of the Punjabi branch of the Balmiki community. It is from him that I grew to love the writings of Bhagmal 'Pagal', whom I would later meet in Jalandhar, and Gurudas 'Alam', whose poem from 1947 stays with me.

After one trip to Jalandhar, I brought back Alam's Jo Mai Mar Gia (1975) for Bhagwan Das. We sat in the main room in his house, me drinking tea, and him reading out the poems. Here is Azaadi,

My friend, have you seen Freedom?

I've neither seen her nor eaten her.

I heard from Jaggu:

She has come as far as Ambala,

And there was a large crowd around her.

She was facing Birla with her back towards the common people.

In Jalandhar, I also met R.C. Sangal, the editor of Jago, Jagte Raho, from whom I got a stack of the papers. Bhagwan Das enjoyed the fact that the paper carried the verse of Baudh Sharan Hans and Alam (I also found Bodhdharam Patrika, another Ambedkarite newspaper that regularly carried poetry, including, from 1978, Alam's great Chunav). The last time I met Bhagwan Das, we talked about poetry. I had thought to bring together some of these poets into a small volume. I was such a poor translator that I doubted my abilities. He was as encouraging as ever.

He called Ambedkar "an iconoclast and a revolutionary". These words apply to Bhagwan Das himself, whose flat in Munirka was a stone's throw from Jawaharlal Nehru University, but for me it was an intellectual haven like no other.



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