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IN THE NEWS

Ambedkar in Hungary

PARDEEP ATTRI

The Romas, a discriminated minority in Hungary, turn to Ambedkar and Buddhism in their quest for dignity and equality.

Romas constitute one of the biggest minority blocks in Europe and have a history of being constantly... discriminated against, persecuted and stigmatised by white Europeans.

Photo: Jai Bhim Network



A fight against injustice: Romas protesting at Heroes Square in Budapest.

Lost rights are never regained by appeals to the conscience of the usurpers, but by relentless struggle.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

On April 14, 2008, when Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's birthday was being commemorated across India, I got an email from an unknown person — Derdák Tibor from Hungary — appreciating my article, "Schools, Toilets or Temples?" which he had read on an e-group. My article had lamented that "at every street corner we have built temples, but not toilets or schools." Tibor said he was a sociologist, and a former member of the Hungarian Parliament now working for the Roma community (derogatorily referred to as gypsies across Europe). Over endless emails, I gradually learnt about the lives of and the problems faced by the Roma community in Hungary, while I explained to him the conditions of Dalits in India.

Striking similarities

What intrigued me was Derdák Tibor said that he and another Roma leader, Orsós János, had been inspired by the philosophy of social transformation of Dr. Ambedkar and his work among the Dalits, and that they were now trying to deploy Ambedkarite ideas in their struggle for equal rights for the Roma community. How and why Ambedkar? Tibor had chanced upon a book on Babasaheb in Paris and a new world opened up. He immediately could see the similarities between the discrimination faced by Dalits in India and Romas in Europe.

Romas/'Gypsies' are normally considered to be "members of nomadic people of Europe with dark skin" with a worldwide population of about 12 million, originally from North India. With their eight million population in Europe, they constitute one of the biggest minority blocks in Europe and have a history of being constantly opposed, refused, discriminated against, persecuted and stigmatised by white Europeans. They constitute about seven per cent of Hungary's population.

After discovering Ambedkar, Tibor and János visited Maharashtra in 2005 and 2007. They felt a deep connection with the Dalits of India and with Dr. Ambedkar's emancipatory agenda. After returning to Hungary, in 2007, they founded the Jai Bhim Network, embraced Buddhism and opened three high schools named after Dr. Ambedkar in Sajókaza, Ózd and Hegymeg for Roma children. One of the activities of the Network is to invite young Dalit activists to Hungary and provide them with opportunities to interact with the Roma community. Recently, I was part of one such three-member delegation and lived with the Roma community in the village Sajókaza for almost a month.

Life in Sajókaza

Sajókaza is a beautiful village about 30 km northeast of Miskolc, with a population of 3,300 people, half of them Romas. The majority of the Romas live on the outskirts of the village in ghettos. In their neighbourhood, there is no tap water, no street lighting and no sewage disposal. A few meters away, in the adjoining non-Roma streets, all these basic amenities are provided. There was a time when all the Romas of the village were employed in the nearby mines but now almost all of them are unemployed and live on a monthly dole from the government. During our stay, it became evident that the Romas suffer as much everyday discrimination as Dalits. There are three churches in Sajókaza, but not even a single Roma visits them. It immediately reminded me of the Hindu temples in India where our entry, though guaranteed in law, is prohibited in practice.

The foremost hurdle in the education of Romas in Hungary is the segregation of Roma children, who are forced to sit in separate classes. They attend different schools/classes in dilapidated buildings without basic amenities, whereas Hungarian children attend regular, fully equipped schools. Tibor says there were separate cups and plates for Roma students till 10 years ago. Roma children grow up constantly dehumanised, humiliated, persecuted and rejected. They are declared 'mentally challenged' and are sent to special schools; so much that about 90 per cent of special school students in Hungary are said to be from this community. Segregation is not limited to schools. In 2003, the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) conducted field research in Hungary and documented 44 cases of so-called "Gypsy rooms" —segregated maternity wards.

Stereotypes are potent tools of hatred. And the Romas suffer from the worst kind of stereotyping by the whites. The 'Gypsies', for the average white European, are necessarily cheaters, beggars, thieves, pickpockets, nomads, people who live in dirty conditions and don't like to work. It is believed by non-Romas that the Romas cut their forefingers so that they could easily pick pockets; and that 'Roma' children wear long clothes to hide the chickens they steal from white farmers' homes. These prejudices are thriving today.

Websites that promote tourism in Europe offer gratuitous advice on 'Gypsies'. One site, under the heading 'Personal security in Rome', says: "Gypsy children could surround you, and shamelessly start robbing your belongings, taking advantage of your surprise. They would then pass the belongings to older gypsy women..." The image of 'Romas' being thieves is so entrenched that they are the first to be rounded up by the police if there is a crime in the neighborhood.

One of the most horrific stories I heard white Hungarians cook up was about pregnant 'Gypsy' women. In September, Oszkar Molnar, the Mayor of Edeleny in Northeast Hungary, accused Roma women in his town of intentionally harming their unborn babies in order to secure extra child benefits. The Equal Opportunity Authority issued sanctions against Oszkar Molnar, a representative of main opposition party Fidesz, but he has vowed to launch a legal appeal against the Authority.

On October 11, 2009, about 1,500 Romas gathered at Heroes Square in Budapest to protest Mayor Molnar's views, and to demonstrate against segregation in schools and discrimination in everyday life. One slogan caught my attention: "A child's head is not a pot that has to be filled, but a torch that needs to be ignited." Says János, president of Jai Bhim Network, "After our turn to Ambedkarite Buddhism, people ask, 'How can you teach Buddhism to gypsies?' What we are doing seems odd since Buddhism in Europe is largely the leisure hobby of the middle classes. But it is easy to answer them: they don't offer effective secondary education for Gypsies, and we do! Whatever people say, we just carry on with our work."

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