

# ROOTS

□ Bhagwant Rasulpuri

I stepped out of the washroom after a shower. Standing in front of the tall mirror in the drawing room, I massaged my scalp. I came back bald from the barber. My palms feel the depth of a scar just above my right eye. Looking into the mirror, I spotted the scar and visualise the scenes of that incident; the very fight, in which a long knife had caused this scar over my right eye and led to my face being covered in blood. I tried hard not to reminisce about that fight but the moment my hand touches the scalp, my mind is clouded by all those forgotten memories. Whenever I'm in a pensive mood, my hand automatically roams over my scalp. It has developed into a kind of habit.

To acquire five kanals of land, I had fought against my whole tribe. That is the place, where I have constructed 'Boddh Vihar' now. I tried to convince my people but in vain. My village 'Dharampura' is inhabited by low-caste ('chamar') people. It is often referred to as workshop/industry. I have heard this name being used ever since I was a child. It was only when I grew up that I came to know of the real name of my village. Dyeing of leather done by the people here got this village its nickname. The people living here were all from my tribe and were into the same business of dyeing leather. Even the adjoining village was also occupied by leather dyers. My father, Ram Rakha also used to do the same job and the same is with my paternal uncles and grandfather now. My grandfather's house had a spacious verandah, where one corner is devoted to the vessels for dyeing of leather. Whenever a relative visited our house he would cover his nose with a handkerchief on the pretext of the foul smell emanating. But it didn't matter to us.

When I floated the thought of constructing a 'Boddh Vihar' on that five-kanal plot, my father was very agitated. The news spread like wild fire in the whole community. All the elderly wise men of the village gathered at my house in the evening.

An old wise man, Duni Chand, who was my grandfather's youngest brother, addressed me, "Look son! Be wise...we all pay our obeisance to Guru Ravidas. Guru has showered his blessings upon our village and we are, under no circumstances, going to leave his shelter. The work of leather has been bestowed upon us by our Guru.



There is an ostentatious place devoted to the worship of Guru Ravidas, where we all go. Hence, there is unity in our community. The village is as if tied together by the holy words of Guru Ravidas ji. Don't spoil the whole state of affairs by your thought process about the five-kanal land...Rakhkha was saying that Gyan is planning to come up with a Buddhist temple in his five-kanal plot. I fail to understand who teaches you all this rubbish! In olden times we used to listen to Buddhist teachings but now the tradition is no longer in tune with the times. Conform to my opinion Son..."

I calmly replied, "Look here Baba ji, I don't stop you from following Guru Ravidas. But our people need Mahatma Buddha badly; Ravidas is no religion at all. You are well aware of the fact that Dr. Ambedkar too had adopted Buddhism. He used to tell all the people from low caste that if they want to enjoy equality of status they should adopt Buddhism."

"Just look at this leather worker's son! A little bit of money has gone to his head, he dreams of becoming an Ambedkar! Keep in mind being Ambedkar is not a child's play!" the head of Ravidas' shrine shouted.

"Brother Gyan we should be loyal to our tribe and community. Whatever wise people do is for our benefit. They have the experience of a lifetime. It's not for nothing that they have grey hair. See the colour of their nails that tell tales of the manual work done by them. Their bodies have decayed in doing years of

labour. We should not betray our Guru", quipped in another one, who tried to convince me.

There was a lot of discussion that degenerated into an argument as well. But I didn't budge an inch; I was not at all affected by all that. The elderly were agitated with me, and now even the young began venting out their anger against me. They were the ones, who had established the 'Ravidas Naujawan Sabha' to carry out the working of the temple of Guru Ravidas. I talked to the members of the Mission Society in foreign lands; they insisted upon building a 'Bodddh Vihar' at that place. Initially, the boys of my village protested against the usage of that place also, then they tried to put pressure on my father that we should donate this land for the Ravidas temple.

The people of my community told my father, "Old man, this is the common land of the people and the Panchayat is planning to file a case against you."

I came to know later on that ownership of that land was controversial. People claimed that this is common land. But it came to my knowledge when I had the amount in full to the seller of the land, so I ignored this fact at that point of time.

Then I gathered the officials of all the 'Bodddh Vihars' and planned to lay the foundation stone of the planned 'Bodddh Vihar'. On the stone was written 'Budhh Vihar, Village Dharampura, whose foundation stone will be laid by Bhikhshu Sangh Anand Kaushleyan on 6 December, 1980'. Below that was mentioned



'Bhikhshu Gyan Ratan, by Ambedkar Mission Society, London'. When the villagers realized that the construction is really about to begin, they started threatening me.

My companions tried to boost my confidence. On the day when the Buddh Vihar was going to be inaugurated, my father told me, without mincing any words, "Look Son, we all are not with you. We are with the community. How does it matter to you as you'll be leaving for England any day, it is we who are going to stay back here with these people." But I started making preparations for the inaugural ceremony. Bhikshu Anand Kaushalyan came all the way from Delhi. Buddhists had come with their families from all the villages around. Many had come to adopt the Buddhist way of life. When all the people had left, the workers of the Ravidas Youth Union barged in. They carried with them rods and other weapons. Prior to that, my father had abused me with foul language. Those people immediately started fighting with me the moment they entered.

I wanted to stay calm. I thought I'll try to convince them again and again. One of the boys caught me by my arm and shook me badly, while another pushed me back twice-thrice. At this I too grabbed a rod to protect myself but I was soon rendered helpless in front of a gang of twelve people. Suddenly a sharp weapon hit me just above my right eye...and there was a lot of blood oozing out. Then after razing down the wall with the foundation

stone of the 'Buddh Vihar', they all left shouting slogans.

Although my family was angry with me, yet in that condition they took me to the hospital. One of my relatives informed the police station. When I regained consciousness after about four-five hours, the police was there to record my statement. All my companions were angered. But I didn't want to flare up this issue. I had never wished to promote groupism in the community. Therefore, I did issue a statement to the police. The matter was laid to rest within a matter of few days. But the scar on my forehead was permanent that always reminded me of the bygone issues.

"Get ready quickly. Food is ready, consume it while it is hot." Hearing my wife's voice emanating from the kitchen, the sights attached to that scar at once fade into oblivion and I emerge out of the drawing room wearing a saffron coloured long robe. I have started dressing up completely like the Buddhist monks and also clean-shaven and bald like them. My wife could not control her laughter when she looks at me. She has also started wearing clothes like the Buddhists.

I sat on the raised platform built below the Peepal tree. I looked at the 'Boddh Vihar' in front of me, that has been built on the half area of the five-kanal plot. On the ground floor is a hall of 36 by 60 feet area. On top of it is a statue in white. I plan to build a school in the remaining half part, a place where the poor kids of Dharampura and around can study. All the



students would come to school wearing the robes of Buddhist monks with their head shaven off. I see the dream being realized in my mind. People from nearby areas come to grace Buddhism. They are also dressed in similar clothes. Those people include women and children as well.

There are some rooms in the Buddh Vihar as well where I stay with my wife and work towards achieving my mission. I visit my father every two days. My deranged mother, who has been bed ridden for twenty years now, starts mouthing foul words as soon as her eyes rest on me. Why does she have fits on seeing me? As a child I used to see my mother reciting *bhajans* while sitting on that *charpoy*. Before going in for that meditation she used to issue an instruction that nobody should disturb her. Gradually she went on to say that she had a glimpse of a saint during her meditations. At times she said Meera Bai resided inside her. She called out to me and asked me to become Meera and sing with a 'toomba'. And then started singing by herself. I am often disturbed at this sight.

I had got prepared a lawn in front of the Buddh Vihar. With a Peepal (Plaksa) tree in the centre, flower shrubs were planted in the garden. The tree has now gained a height of about ten feet. Whenever I see that tree peace prevails and I feel calm and peaceful. Whenever I meditate under this tree, in my mind's eye I can see the ancient 'Buddha Tree' and the eighty feet statue of Budha. Even in

this Buddh Vihar we have imported the statue of Buddha from Thailand.

My wife brings in food for me that consists of boiled vegetable and two chapattis. This is all that I eat. Since the time that I have experienced the rise in my blood pressure, I have drastically reduced having oily things in my diet. Occasionally I have high sugar level, so I take too many precautions. I experience high blood pressure due to mental anxieties. I don't even have sweet things. My wife sits on the mat spread across the floor in front of me. Kids from about ten houses of the village come to the Buddh Vihar daily. I teach school subjects to them and also tell them about Buddhist teachings. I stay in the village for around four months and then I leave for England with my wife. The administration of the Vihar is taken care of the officials here. I don't work in England either. My wife and I both make do with the pension that we receive.

I can clearly recall that when I last visited my ancestral home, my father, who was reading a newspaper in the verandah after my customary questions about the well-being of my mother and house, asked me, "My son if Buddhist religion was so good then why was it wiped out from India?" dug up the knowledge from inside and replied after a thoughtful pause, "Bapu ji, about three-fourth of the population of India comprised of Buddhists. When the Yemen came to India they started killing the Buddhists. They demolished the statues of Buddha



and the Boddh Vihars. The monks were killed on a large-scale. It was because of this fear factor that a large number of Buddhists fled from India and took shelter in countries like China, Tibet and also some went to far away countries. Consequently, Buddhism was slowly wiped out from India." Whenever someone from my neighbourhood asked me some such question, I always progressed with this flow of thought.

Just then my deranged mother burst out in a fit of shouting loudly. My father gave her a pill with a view to tranquilise her. Gradually she was put to rest.

It happened once that my mother entered into the gates of the Boddh Vihar. My whole attention was diverted towards her. She bowed in front of the statue for long and kept on repeating the words, "Hail the saints! Hail Ravidas!" And then she came and sat in the Vihar. It was with much difficulty that I took mother home. This scene was often repeated. She used to laugh after looking at me. I felt scared of her laughter. My mind was clouded with various thoughts and my concentration was disturbed.

Sitting in front of me, my father again tried to tease me, "Did more people also become a cause for the fall of Buddhism in India?"

While trying to convince him, I quoted History, "Father History says that those who propagated Buddhism in India were the natives of India, the Nag people. They were not Aryans. Rather they had an

enmity with the Aryans. That is why many wars were fought between both these tribes. The Nag people wanted to do away with the Aryan tribe. But some people say that at one point of time the Nag tribe was done away with by the Aryans. But according to some historical sources, August muni saved one 'naag'. And we all belong to the same tribe Father. It is we people who have saved Buddhism till date." My father sits in silence after that. I don't know whether he liked my statements or not. As I stood up and started walking away he said, "Look after your kids too my child. All the time you are engrossed in this task only."

I agree both my children have grown up to be opposite to what I expected them to be. My son is not at all interested in my religious activities. My daughter too seems to be living in a world of her own. Now I feel like staying abroad. I'll be receiving the pension.

Just then a leaf falls into my plate that distracts my attention. After having my food I hand over the utensils to my wife. Very delicately I keep the leaf aside. Then I start concentrating upon myself again. All this talk of the time about twelve years back, when I experienced fits. My parents have informed me about all this. I have not even set up the Boddh Vihar yet. It was when I had travelled from Dharampura to England that I gave up wearing pant-shirt, shaved off my head and started wearing saffron coloured clothes. "Just see my son has gone mad and turned a saint!" my mother reacted



sharply on and shrieked. "Leave this place, you are not one of us...you are not a son of this tribe...go...just go...", my mother continued to abuse me while I was leaving the house.

"Yes mother I am not one of you. I belong to the 'naag' tribe", irritated I uttered these words. Then suddenly silence descended upon her. Sometimes it happened that mother charged towards me to tear off my saffron coloured robes. I used to have a tough time controlling her and making her lie down on her bed again. I was crazy about becoming a monk. That is why I started writing my name as Monk Gyan Ratan instead of my original Gyan Chand. Mahatma Buddha used to come in my dreams and I found my world revolving around him.

I dreamt of King Bimbisara coming to adopt Buddhism. Often my dreams were about the dacoit Unglimaal, Yashodra and Gautami. When such type of sights became common with me I ran away from my home and without informing anybody at home I went to Nagpur, the place I was to come into the folds of Buddhism. From there I went to Nalanda, the place that was once home to the world famous university of the Buddhists. I was stunned to see the remains of Nalanda University. I was reminded of the place in Sultanpur Lodhi, where once stood a Buddhist monastery. About four to five hundred people could reside at that place.

After putting in some efforts at excavating the site I discovered a few remnants the Buddhist monastery as well

as some partially destroyed idols. I placed all these things in the Buddha Vihar. Then I could form a picture of the rooms of the university in my mind. I visualized Buddhists meditating there. In my stream of day-dreaming I asked quite a few questions from a monk residing there: What is the reason for suffering? I also asked as to why the monks don't give much importance to household and family life? "I don't know", the monk answered. Then I reached the Ajanta Caves, where I was left dumbfounded after having a look at the sights and scenes there. I made a note of quite a few points there and also took a few photographs. Then I came back to my home. My family was a peeved lot, that was all because of my actions and behaviour. When at home, I used to read books all day and night. I was out of the house whenever I felt like going out.

One day I reached a township located near Phillaur. The remains of a Buddha Matth were buried under the foundations of that area. I don't know where I read about or it might have been my intuition. I roamed around in the plateau-like region of that area. Had I had the power I would have ordered an excavation of that site! I sat under a Peepal tree growing there. 'Why does excavation not take place here?' my heart cried.

Then appeared before my mind's eye the remains of the Buddhist monastery buried there. I could visualize the large statue of Mahatma Buddha. I took out an incense stick from my bag, lit a



candle, placed some flower petals there and started praying. Then my hand took a round of my bald scalp and I thought of the statues of 'Bamiyan' at the time when I had come to know of those statues being pulled down, I had not eaten a thing for full seven days. I was totally shattered and was restless after a long time. It was as if I had wheels fitted in place of feet, I used to wander from one place to another. My sons and daughters had stopped giving me any money. Therefore, I only had the support of my pension to meet my livelihood expenses.

I am reminded of an incident when dressed in saffron-coloured robes I went to the Guru Ravidas dham very unwillingly, where all the elderly men of my clan had gathered. I invited them to visit 'Buddh Vihar' and promised to tell them about the preachings of Mahatma Buddha. But they were least affected by whatever I said. Then I returned from that place after I bowed my head in front of the statue of Ravidas. I can recall that once when I was sitting in a room at Buddh Vihar and I saw before my eyes the members of my family; my father, who used to take to the Ravidas Temple and sometimes my mother used to take to another Saint. My mother used to tie a handkerchief on my forehead whenever we used to go there. I used to be very excited when I paid obeisance there and used to take parsad in a very excited manner. Whenever such things dominated my thoughts, my Ravidasia personality of Gyan Chand dominated my Buddhist facet of Gyan. Once in a while I

also felt like abdicating my garb of Buddhism and go back to my people.

I give my head a shake and move my hand on my bald scalp. I try to bring myself out of my mind's reverie.

One day I bought a picture of Ravidas and kept it in one of my books of Buddhism. Whenever I wanted to I kept looking at the photo for a long time. I used to bow my head in respect and then kept it back in the book. Then I felt sick of myself. Continuously I moved my hand over my scalp as if trying to punish my mind.

I am reminded of the time I was in college. May be, it was my last year in graduation. There was a large group of boys from my village in my class. An idea struck my mind that we should celebrate Guru Ravidas' birthday. We put forward this request to the Principal but he rejected it. All the boys of our clan went on a strike. To avoid flaring up this issue, the Principal conceded to our demands the next day. From that day onwards a tradition to celebrate Guru Ravidas' birthday was established. After my studies I got married and went to England. It was there that I got influenced from Buddhism.

I was sitting in the shade of a Peepal tree when about eight to ten children come to me. They go inside a room and change into the robes of a monk. After dressing up they first of all bow their head in front of Buddha's statue and lay flowers at the feet. Then they line up to sing a Buddhist prayer I had taught myself. I move towards Buddh Vihar and enquire



about the well-being of all. Then I start telling them about the four noble truths of Buddhism.

"My child, attaining moksha or salvation is the most satisfying task and getting satisfaction is what religion is. What is religion? Understanding this is very important. You can experience that. And for understanding the truth and experiencing it you need to know and comprehend the four noble truths and also practically follow them."

The eldest from among the child monks puts up a question, "What are these four noble truths?"

"They are related to suffering, causes of sufferings, cessation of suffering and the path to cessation of suffering." Then I start elaborating upon them. Then all of a sudden at the end of my sermon I accidentally utter 'Jai Ravidas'. And I open my eyes wide open, my ears all alert; I look at the children around me. I think that my words have not fallen upon their ears. For long I keep standing in front of the statue of Buddha and ponder upon the reasons why I uttered those words.

Children say, "We could not understand all." Even I have not been able to comprehend all these things. It just happens that I preach all these things when the Buddhist hidden inside me starts talking. I too don't realize the meaning of all the things I speak then. Sometimes I feel that it is not right to talk of such high status and noble things with the children.

I asked Usha to prepare a cup of tea for me. I sit in front of the computer.

For the past many days I have been preparing a book on 'Daily Rituals for Buddhists'. For spreading the message I have got about twenty books published till now. The cost is borne by the society but it is my responsibility to get the book ready.

Today I had to write about the Buddhist rituals associated with death. The incident of my mother's death that happened last week haunts me. It has been hardly seven days since she died. For the past twenty years she has been mentally deranged and confined to bed. In her last days she was reduced to the form of a skeleton. I wanted the Buddhist rituals on my mother's death but all my relatives opposed it, so being alone I was rendered helpless in front of all of them. A person was called from the Ravidas Dham to execute all the rituals.

Unwillingly I kept along in all the rituals and then accompanied the body when they were taking her to the cremation grounds. Bhikshu Kaushaleyan dominated my thoughts and therefore, it was my spontaneous outburst when I started telling a person beside me, "Mahatma Buddha says that old age is a misery, disease is another one; if we try to tackle our sufferings, more sufferings emerge out of it. We all are tied to each other by the greed and these are referred to as the clutches of materialism. It is out of this tight grip that feelings and emotions arise inside us. If such feelings don't arise inside a man, kids won't be born. If birth is not there, then even old



age and death aren't. In turn, if all these are not there then there would be no suffering. You know, it is Buddha who talks of getting rid of the sufferings. Another fact is that..." The person beside me was merely nodding and agreeing to all the things. Probably he was my mother's nephew.

Now they'll follow the same traditions on the bhog ceremony of my mother. I came back home with a heavy heart. I had a risen blood pressure. The Bhikshu Gyan Ratan inside me was in conflict with me that day, "What happened Bhikhsu Gyan Ratan! What of all your declarations that I would make all the people of Dharampura convert to Buddhism. In my mind I think, 'I am not the one who will get defeated very easily. You must be aware of the fact that even Mahatma Buddha had the following of about ten-twelve Bhikshus.'

The Bhog ceremony of my mother will be performed tomorrow. I am feeling very discomfited with all the thoughts. I want to run away from here. I think of my mother. I think of Bhikshu Kaushaleyan's sermons, Ambedkar's lecture that he gave when he adopted Buddhism. Quietly I wear

the brick-red robes, take a book on Buddhism with me, go the station and board the train for a long journey. I have experienced the same thing earlier also. Then I suddenly spring up with surprise when I came across the photo of Guru Ravidas kept in that book. I closed that book immediately as if I had seen a horrible thing! Hey Anand! Be your own guiding light, be your own disciple...Think of religion as your path. Don't take the guidance from anybody except from religion. I could hear a voice saying all this inside me. I try to pacify myself by drinking water.

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"Unlike a drop of water which loses its identity when it joins the ocean, man does not lose his being in the society in which he lives. Man's life is independent. He is born not for the development of the society alone, but for the development of his self."

- Dr. B. R. Ambedkar