

LEAVING THE GHETTO

Istvan Lazi, a Hungarian Dalit, speaks of struggles for a better life

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My name is Istvan Lazi. My nickname is Benu. I was born at Kazincbarcika, in Northern Hungary, in 1987. My family are gypsies. It is difficult for non-gypsies to understand what that really means. Most non-gypsies think it is a matter of race or skin colour, but it is not. To be a gypsy is a belonging. It is to be part of a community where everyone knows, 'We are gypsies'. Gypsies are a community of people who have the same way of thinking about things. Even though skin colour is not the main point about being a gypsy, many gypsies are dark skinned. When two Buddhist friends visited us recently from India, people seeing us together thought they were my relatives. If an Indian doesn't speak English then people in Hungary will think he is a gypsy.

In my village there are several gypsy localities, all separate from the non-gypsies. There is the gypsy locality where I live - most of these, my people, are gypsies who have been in Hungary for many centuries and speak Hungarian. There is another smaller gypsy locality for Vlach gypsies who came from Romania a century or so ago and speak the ancient gypsy language, which is quite similar to Hindi and other North Indian languages. The number of gypsies is growing in my village as more gypsy families move in and they are now in the majority. So conflicts are growing with the non-gypsies because none of them want a gypsy neighbour. The mayors of many Hungarian villages are always counting how many gypsies there are in the village - because it is obvious that they are becoming the majority and that they do not want.

I have three brothers and one sister. My father died in 1999, so my mother had to raise her family alone. She had no regular work, but did temporary jobs whenever she could get them. When she had work, she could get money for the family. When she did not, she had to rely on grants given by the state: one for orphans, which she received when my father died, and then a family grant given to all families in Hungary, but this is not enough for a family to live on. Whenever possible she did some work as a maid in non-gypsy homes in the village. Sometimes she had to rely on loans from rich gypsies, who charge very large rates of interests - perhaps even as much as 100% per month.

From the spring to the autumn she would go some 5-800 kilometres away to do various kinds of seasonal agricultural work. She would work continuously, day and night, for days on end, sometimes without any chance to sleep. During the day she would be cultivating the landowner's crops and at night packing them for the market next day. Since the work was 'black' or illegal, the landowners could do whatever they wanted, making the workers labour for very long hours in very poor conditions. They would often have to sleep in tents, which were not very good and did not keep out the weather - when it rained Other members of our extended family would look after us children while she was away. My mother was very strong - more like a man. She would sometimes go into the forest and carry back heavy loads of wood for cooking and for sale.

The relations between gypsies and non-gypsies are variable. There are stereotypes among non-gypsies that gypsies always steal and lie, and people who rarely meet or mix with gypsies often believe this. But there are places where gypsies and non-gypsies get on well together. This happens when they have been brought up side by side from childhood. They have the chance to know and understand each other. In those place where gypsies and non-gypsies are segregated, either because they live in different localities or because they are separated at school, there is more conflict. I don't think it is just the job of gypsies to work against this conflict, as people often say. We all have to work together.

In Hungary this question has become more and more problematic in the last decade. In the village where I was brought up, I thought the village was not segregated, but then I realised that I was a student in the last integrated class at the village school. The next classes after me were segregated into gypsy classes and classes for the non-gypsy Hungarians. After this separation the teachers began to complain all the time that it is not possible to work with the gypsies. They would say to me, 'Why can't they all behave like you?' I replied, 'Why did you separate them?' They said it was for the sake of the gypsies - it was much easier for them to learn if they were taught separately. I told them when we were integrated there weren't problems between the gypsy and the non-gypsy children they are complaining about now. They don't know each other nowadays. They don't have the habit to live together. They don't make friends with people from the other classes. When I was at school and classes were integrated we made friends with non-gypsies. With this separation, the non-gypsy people think that all gypsies are the same because they don't know them.

Although classes in my time at the village school were integrated, actually most gypsies did not go to that school. Many gypsy children were considered mentally subnormal and were sent to a special school in the town. But when Hungary joined the European Union, the government received money from the Union to educate mentally handicapped children to be taught in the village schools. This gave the local authorities a big chance. The non-gypsy population of Hungary is decreasing because their families do not have many children, while the gypsy population is increasing. So they need more gypsies to attend the schools to keep them running. But they do not want most of them to join the same classes as the non-gypsies. So they organise 'C' class for gypsies (C for 'cigany', which is the Hungarian for 'gypsy'), where they are taught differently, using different text books.

In my case they were not able to classify me at first because I didn't go the kindergarten at the school, since I was suffering from ear problems at that time, and it was at the kindergarten that the classification into normal and subnormal was made. I am sure it was considered dangerous that I was in the main class. After two weeks I was sent to special examiners to see whether or not I should be sent to the special school for the subnormal. The examiners got me to draw a picture of a baby and asked me what food I ate at home. I said, 'Noodles with beans'. But these psychologists didn't know this food, which is the common meal of poor gypsies, so I had to explain to them what it was. That convinced them that I was intelligent. So I have to thank noodles for my education!

Most children were segregated in the kindergarten and I was one of the only gypsies studying with non-gypsies. Of thirty children, 25 were treated as sub-normal and sent to the special school, while only four or five studied in the normal school with non-gypsies. And I was one of them.

I didn't get on well at school to begin with. I spent six years without learning from books. Whatever I learnt was just what I heard the teacher talk about in class. My teacher asked me, 'If you are so intelligent that you can learn just by hearing, why don't you try learning from books?' But I was not interested. Nobody in our families went for higher education. I was fortunate that I had a very good teacher, who was a real mentor to me: she asked me what I wanted from life: 'Do you want to scavenge? Do you want to live in debt? Do you want to be a beggar? Don't you want to leave this situation?' I thought about what she said and replied, 'Yes' - but I was sure it would never be

possible.

This lady was a non-gypsy schoolteacher at my school. She was very sensitive to our position and she invited a gypsy, Lazar Peter, to come to the school and speak to us. He was himself a schoolteacher at a school about a hundred kilometres away. The other teachers left the classroom so that we could talk to him directly. It was wonderful for me to see a gypsy teacher. He told us the story of his life and showed us that it was possible for us to be well-educated and to work with our brains not our hands. But I thought he was telling lies. In our village there are more than a thousand gypsies but not one has a university degree. However I combined in my mind what the gypsy teacher said with what my own teacher said - and I thought maybe this makes sense.

I decided to learn seriously. I asked my teacher if I could spend each afternoon in school after classes were finished so I could study a bit more. She said that the afternoon is reserved for younger children, but nonetheless she let me remain till three o'clock and I began to learn. She saw that my marks were getting better and better - I have never had the best marks but I got the next best. However, I still did not think of going to university. I decided to go to a vocational school to learn commerce. But then three people came to our school who had a big effect on my life. Ujlacky Andras was the Hungarian official responsible for European Union educational grants, and Orsos Janos and Derdak Tibor are activists for gypsy education. Janos is himself a gypsy and both are Buddhists. They told us that a student hostel was to be set up in Ozd, a nearby district place, for bright gypsy children. They encouraged us to think about going and I decided to apply.

So I got admission to Ozd student hostel. That meant I received financial support. I didn't really want to go to the hostel but the scholarship was attractive to me. I wanted to be in commerce, because I saw that rich gypsy families could make a lot of money from loans, but here I could get money through studying at high school. Twenty-five gypsy children were admitted to the hostel. There was only one person from my village, but we all became good friends, with a lot of solidarity among us, for instance sometimes we teased our teachers. It was a good group of friends. Each morning we each went off to different schools in the town. The hostel paid my fares to get to school and helped us financially in other ways too.

Although the hostel started off well, unfortunately it didn't stay as good. The teachers were always changing and the new ones were always worse than the ones they replaced. So, many of the youngsters left the hostel - and the best left first. There must have been something wrong with the system because the less capable students were left. There were some exceptions because some got better treatment than others, since the teachers were always having favourites. I was one of them because they had confidence in me but not in the others. For instance, I could use the computers on my own when I wanted. I had the confidence of all the students because I was in communication with all of them. I had a certain authority so that I could fight for them - for instance, when one friend went to the director to get money for a karate suit, he got nothing, but when I went with him he got it. The teachers did not want to organise things for us. So I began to organise programmes for the hostel. We had a repertoire of performances of drama, music, and dancing that we entered for contests, and which we took to old people's homes and kindergartens.

Before I went to the dormitory 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. They started the Little Tiger High School for gypsy children, with the support of the Hungarian Buddhist Church, in South Western Hungary and I visited them there from time to time.

They showed me the gypsy villages in that region and that was important for me because I came to know more about the life of gypsies outside my own region. I would help them as much as I could, for instance, when they organised excursions for youngsters sometimes I had the task of accompanying the younger children. I helped Tibor in his office and kept the accounts of the Trust they have formed.

Janos and Tibor went to India in 2005/6 and they told me about their experiences there and how much they had appreciated that. They gave me the email address of Subhuti, one of the leaders of the Buddhist movement in England and in India. I asked my English teacher to help me reply, but she said she wouldn't help me because it was just a trick of Tibor's: I would write the email but in my name someone else would go to England, never me. However, I wrote the letter myself with help from Tibor. When Subhuti replied, I was afraid; I didn't think it could be a reality that a stranger who doesn't know me could reply. I didn't know what to write to him because he was a Buddhist and I didn't know what to say. When Subhuti came to Hungary, it was good because I could make acquaintance with people from other countries. So my relationships were not just with the High School or with Janos and Tibor but wider and wider all over the world.

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.

Because of my friendships with Janos and Tibor I arranged to go to a university near the High School. However, soon after that they had to leave the school. We decided to set up a new school, near my own village in Northern Hungary, under our own Buddhist organisation, the Jai Bhim Religious Network. We called the school, 'Dr Ambedkar High School'. We had a lot to do to set it up, but in August last year we succeeded. Janos and Tibor have good relations with the mayor and other officials in my village, Sajakaza. The teachers at my school and the officials of the municipality were interested in this kind of high school because they had previously visited the Little Tiger High School and were impressed by what they saw. That is why it was easy for us to convince them it would be good for their village to give gypsy children that opportunity.

We called the school after Dr Ambedkar. I like Dr Ambedkar and his story because it is a great story which is very appealing to me. He came from nothing to become a cabinet minister and to write the constitution. I am proud of him because he showed an example of perseverance in the face of great difficulties. It helps me to believe that I can become somebody too. Maybe India is successful because Dr Ambedkar gave people belief in themselves. If he hadn't converted, people wouldn't be equal and people wouldn't have begun to study in big masses. I like him because it is similar to our stories, for example, because I am a student at the university, my cousins also want to go to university, whereas previously nobody from my family even finished high school. Though I like Dr Ambedkar, even more important for me is the Buddha. I have very great veneration for them both, but even more for the Buddha. I am very inspired by his life.

What do I want to do with my life? I want to have 100 children - my grandmother had 21 brothers and sisters. But I am only joking! I would like to have a pleasant family - so I would like to have only two or three children because I want to give them everything. And I want to work for society

like Janos and Tibor do. I want to do their kind of work but I have a problem with the way they live. They don't have their own families and they have no private life. They are always coming and going from this village to that without resting. I don't want to lose my family. Nonetheless with all my strength I want to fight for other people to have a better life.

At the beginning I said that my name was Istvan Laszi, but I have another name. Two years ago, during a retreat in Hungary in the summer of 2006, seven of us asked whether we can have Buddhist names. Subhuti agreed and wanted a day to think about it. Then, after a meditation, he told us what names he thought would be good for each of us. My name is Asok - unshakable. And I like that new name very much and I use it on the internet and many foreigners find me because of this name.

I am proud of my Indian name and 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. May they have perseverance, strength, - and good health!