

Editorial

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Fully three years have passed since the OCBS published the first number of its *Journal*. In it, my editorial reported on what I found worrying features of the 16th congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, held a few months earlier at Dharma Drum Buddhist College near Taipei. I commented on what seemed to me striking and undesirable imbalances both in the subjects of the papers and in the national origins of those giving them.

Now this volume of our *Journal* follows upon the next (the 17th) congress of the IABS, this one held in Vienna, and only slightly smaller (reckoned in number of papers and of participants) than the previous one. Exactly the same features recurred. The number of participants from South and Southeast Asia was tiny, so that several of the world's major Buddhist communities were hardly represented at all. Again, there were very few papers on early Buddhism, very few on Theravāda or on Pali sources, little attention was paid to history, and none at all to the Buddha as a historical figure. As every time, there were plenary meetings at the opening of the congress and near its end, but the agenda was stereotyped, and no opportunity was given to mention, let alone discuss, these issues. There is no sign that the officers of the IABS think that they should concern themselves with such matters. A pity.

As I write this, preparations are being completed for a rather unusual Buddhist conference which will be held in Pune for 3 days, 22-24 November. It is being organized by Mr Pravin Bhalesain of the Indian Institute of Buddhist Studies (which is in Pune) and myself, on behalf of the OCBS. Dr Bhalchandra Mungekar, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bombay and longstanding member of the Rajya Sabha, will inaugurate it and preside. The title of the conference is "Buddhism Rejoins the Great Conversation in India". Attendance is free and open to all.

The title was invented for us by Mr Jeffrey Race, and publicised before details of the programme could be put in place. Then, as we went along, we realised that the topic, which implies a dialogue between Buddhists and Hindus, was too hot a potato for India's present political circumstances. So it must be confessed that this title does not give a clear picture of the programme. That picture can now be derived from the conference website, <http://ocbsindiaconference.org>, which spells out in some detail what the various sessions hope to achieve. In sum, we shall be considering social, cultural and educational challenges which the Ambedkarite community has to face today. We do not aspire to display great learning, let alone to make intellectual breakthroughs; but we shall try to raise morale, stimulate thinking, and even – if all goes well – to suggest practical measures.

There will be few academic lectures. However, on the second morning (23 November) four lecturers will look at Buddhist revival movements. Each lecture will consider a great Buddhist revival; the four are of very different ages but all alive today, and based in different parts of the world: Japan, Taiwan, northern America and northern India. They have one central feature in common: in all of them the laity have played the leading role. On the other hand, they present four totally different views of what Buddhism is chiefly about. As I have written, they have such diverse ideas and practices that the morning “should make us all aware of the **richness, variety and adaptability of the Buddhist tradition**. We may also find that we know less about Buddhism than we thought.”

In a speech which I shall probably make on the final day, I propose to strike a contrasting note, which I can call “Back to Buddhist Basics: Love and Compassion”. In this speech I intend to formulate a goal for the Ambedkarite community and to suggest a means to help attain it.

In advanced and complex societies, such as India, virtually every social group forms an association, or several associations, to further its interests. These interests are mainly conceived in social, political and economic terms. As we all know, it is normal in India for castes and communities to have such associations. Naturally the Ambedkarite Buddhists already have such organisations, and I am sure that most of them do valuable work. However, I am no less sure that what is in the forefront of their minds as their reason for existence is that the Ambedkarites have little power in comparison with their numbers, and as a community still suffer from centuries of deprivation and discrimination, so that they must work to remedy this situation.

To my mind, however, the Ambedkarites hold a trump card – but have not

yet learnt to make full use of it. The trump card is so obvious that it escapes their notice: they are Buddhists, and therefore are pledged to make their lives revolve around the twin values of Love and Compassion. If their associations make the practice of love and compassion their central goal, the very reason for their being, they will be unique, and uniquely wonderful. How so? Because generally the association of every community bears the name of that community, and works precisely for the people in that category, in a competition to outdo all other groups and categories. But what makes the Ambedkarites a community is that they are Buddhists, which commits them **to feel and practise love and compassion for all sentient beings.**

So Ambedkarites, both as individuals and as a community, have – I repeat – an absolutely unique character, and hold a trump card. For them, to work for the good of their community, and to work for what they believe in, is to work for all living beings. If they can really practise that ideal, the world will soon sit up and take notice!

While the phrase “all sentient beings” does mean precisely that, it still allows one to have priorities. And the priorities are not hard to work out: one can best alleviate suffering by helping those worse off than oneself, not those better off. So who are the worst off? Some people will first think of animals, and yes, they must be kept in mind and helped. But we all know – though we don’t like thinking about it – that in India there are huge numbers of people who are even worse off than most animals. I only have to mention the many millions of people whom the British labeled Criminal Castes, and who have been renamed Denotified Tribes (DNTs). I cannot here give a lecture about them. But we all know, unless we wish to turn a blind eye, that very many of these people are excluded from every kind of employment or occupation in which they could legally make a living, so that they are forced to steal if they wish to keep themselves and their families alive, and this in turn is used to justify treating them with horrendous brutality.

So, to be brief, the Ambedkarites have before their very eyes people whom society treats even worse than it has treated the Scheduled Castes; and if Buddhism means anything at all, it must mean attempting the huge task of remedying this vast injustice.

I am thus proposing a new goal; but I also wish to recommend new means. Far too little use has so far been made of the Internet, and of the wide accessibility of mobile phones which can take and transmit photographs. Many of the most flagrant injustices are inflicted upon these people by agents of the government,

first and foremost the police. Since the complainants are powerless, they rarely have the means to inform the public about their sufferings beyond their immediate locality. Unless a wider world is rapidly made aware of what is happening, those who complain of brutal treatment, torture, rape, or even murder take the terrible risk that the perpetrators will soon arrive to inflict vengeance on anyone who has dared to speak out. The internet can rapidly convey reports, photos and even videos which can at least initially appear anonymously, and reach powerful people and organisations both within India and even beyond. Even if the perpetrators discover in due course who is responsible for spreading the news, it will often be too late for them to do anything to stop it. Besides, the Internet is usually accessible to anyone who contacts the web site; it need not be subject to the editorial control of a politician, a newspaper editor, or anyone else who might wish to use their power to prevent such news from getting out. Thus, even if one organisation is hesitant to publish, the victim can always turn to another.

Of course, I am not suggesting that these wonderful new means of communication should be used only for publicising atrocities. They can and should be used equally for the public airing of any and every issue of oppression and discrimination. We should reflect that for all its defects India is still a democracy with free media of communication. What I am suggesting could not be carried out in China, where the Internet is censored and controlled. Let the Ambedkarite community, then, take full advantage, without delay, in the fact that they are pledged to follow the teachings of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar by acting always in accord with the Buddhist values of love and compassion, and apply that to their position as citizens of India, a country where information is allowed to circulate and be used to improve the lives of all living beings.