

Mahaparinirvan Din, 6th December

Written by Pradnya Mangala

Published on 06 December 2014

- Round Table India

Pradnya Mangala



When I think of Mahaparinirvan Din things that come straight to my mind are the preparation which used to happen in my house from the night of 4th December itself. My father and mother, along with help of a few of their friends, would set up their stall at Chaityabhumi to provide food for people who travelled from far-off places to pay homage. Whatever was possible in their limited capacity and with available resources they used to pull it together and do the arrangements.

One such 5th December evening I was travelling in a local train with my family carrying all the food that was prepared. My *aaji* (maternal Grandmother) narrated a very striking experience. Recalling that still gives me goose bumps. She said the day they heard the news about Babasaheb's death their entire *chawl* where they stayed was grief struck. She, with moist eyes, said that she felt exactly the same when she had lost her own father.

Without bothering whether they had worn chappals or not, they just walked towards Babasaheb's residence *Rajgriha*. The distance between her house and Babasaheb's residence was barely 30- 40 minutes' on foot but there were so many people on the road that it took around 2 to 3 hours to reach it. Funeral procession arrangements were made; the entire atmosphere was filled with sadness which was unexplainable.

"Our father left us, the huge shelter of love and care that we had over us is lost. You brought us among humans, gave meaning to our existence. What will we do without you? The fact that you are no more is unbearable, my heart is breaking, my body is losing all the strength" she lamented. Everyone in the crowd strived for one last glimpse of Babasaheb. They walked with heavy steps with the procession towards Chaityabhumi. Lakhs and Lakhs of people gathered from all over the country to pay their last homage to our Father."



Aaji says that she had seen the sea for so many years but that day the sea appeared very different. "The waves were bursting as if it was crying with us, as if it was questioning the universe, why did it take away our father from us? After the funeral rituals were done, people slowly dispersed with heavy hearts, silent tears and with the sense of un-repairable loss. But I just couldn't leave the place. I sat, I sat there throughout the night watching the flames turn into ashes. The pain was so severe that it forced me to reflect, within me every word that I had heard from Babasaheb echoed aloud. That was the longest night of my life. That day an illiterate woman like me got a mission for her life, I just wanted to work to fulfil Babasaheb's dreams".

Since childhood, every 6th December I remember this incident which my Aaji had narrated to me. Whenever I visit Rajgriha or Chaityabhumi I go through similar emotions that my Aaji must have gone through then. Dalits possess no economic and social capital, the only capital that we have is the inspiration we draw from Babasaheb's life struggle and what Babasaheb did for us. It is not an emotional outpouring, it is how we make sense of our lives, it is much beyond words and emotions.

Chaityabhumi is one of the few places from where we derive our strength to move on and carry our struggle for equality and justice. Living throughout my life in Mumbai, what I encountered in school and college was always indifference and arrogance. Hardly anyone knew about the significance of 6th December, and mind you, I mean not only students but professors as well.

The Shivaji Park area which surrounds Chaityabhumi is one of the elite areas of Mumbai and essentially Brahmean dominated. My classmates who stayed in nearby areas always kept complaining that their evening walks are ruined during the 1st week of December because people gather there in large numbers and stay on footpaths.

I used to study in a library at Matunga, it was very close by Rajgriha. Suddenly, from 3rd of December onwards, people coming to the library became less and less. I happened to overhear conversations outside the library saying things like, 'we are not coming for 3 to 4 more days as 'these' jaibhim people will come from all places, from all over and dirty our place. They have no manners, you see, I just prefer not coming out of the house. They get everything for free, reservations, free train tickets and what not'.

I always felt so disgusted listening to all this I just wanted to burst out on all of them asking them what do they do in their religious celebrations like Ganesh Chaturthi, Navratri, Diwali etc. Don't they feel dirty then? Entire Juhu chowpatty, Dadar chowpatty, all lakes in Mumbai and suburban regions are scrouposly polluted. We don't do that! Neither have we caused any chaos.

If you see Chaityabhumi, Rajgriha on 14th April or on 5th-6th December, there is always utmost discipline in these gatherings, no stampedes that keep happening in temples across the country. We gather not to enjoy and have fun and waste resources, we gather because this day signifies our existence. They help us to locate that space for ourselves in this utterly unequal and inhumane society where we have taken birth. I strongly feel that dirt is not in the surroundings, *dirt is your minds, that you fail to recognize humanity and human emotions!*



What Babasaheb and Buddha have taught us is not hatred, we don't believe in hating. We have a legacy of practicing compassion and tolerance. The only reason for me writing this experience is that - don't think that we cannot give it back, we are very much capable in every sense. So the next time you speak about our celebrations, gatherings, your stereotyped images of Dalits, reservations - *take a minute to think about your own self, your community and their deeds.*

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Pradnya Mangala holds a MSc degree in Environmental Sciences from Institute of Science and a Diploma in Disaster Management from TISS.