

First, the main participants in this episode:

Bhanté (Sam Dech Preah Bhanté Vira Bellong Dharmawara Mahathera). (Bhanté had established a Buddhist Vihara when he initially took up residence in Lucknow, India ~1947 and there met B K Nehru (Uncle to Jawaharlal Nehru and manager of the family tea plantation) who frequently said Bhanté cured him of ‘the incurable’ through use of color healing methods and prayer.



Bhanté also converted Ambedkar to Buddhism ~1956 (Ambedkar converted millions of unclass Dalits to Buddhism and his birthday is celebrated as a national holiday in India to this day).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhante_Dharmawara

Dharmavirio, a monk he had ordained decades before, hence his name Dharma virio, who was then a member of the All India Refugee Commission in New Delhi with an apartment on Shahshahan Road, a staff of three and an office all provided by the Indian government

Ram Nath Mishra, recently retired as Deputy Finance minister of India and his gracious family in Delhi, Mr **Sharma**, the Duty Station Manager of the All India Railroad Terminal in New Delhi,

Sham **Bhatnagar**, an acquaintance from Skillman, NJ, who was visiting family back home in India. His brother was the head of the All India Eye Institute in Delhi and Sham’s nephew and his wife also maintained a private clinic with him. Shyam’s mother hosted us for an evening in Delhi.

Bob **Sonawane**, an EPA deputy administrator and attendee at an Environmental Medicine International Conference in Mumbai chaired by a Dr from Goa, and about 250 global experts.

Second, the places of this saga:

Mumbai/Pune then New Delhi, Benares/Varanasi (Kumba Mela) and Lucknow

Third, the saga:

This episode starts in Mumbai/Bombay where an international environmental medicine conference was being held. Bob Sonawane, a Deputy Administrator at EPA at the time and friend of Dr. Ted Rozema, suggested it as a quality meeting and helpful because the participants and presenters spanned the globe as well as the full intellectual gamut.

There are a few amusing episodes to fill in later in regard to first experiences of Mother India in the effulgence of diverse strata that co-exist in largely exclusive subgroups, the successors to the caste system.

This includes a brief visit to Pune and to Meher Baba's Samadhi. Erych, Baba's aide, was alive and his hug and blessing remain memorable till today. Charles Haynes, a first amendment advocate, had lived with Meher Baba when he was a toddler. He told me exactly where to go and whom to ask for once at Meher Baba's retreat center.

Being in India for the first time, it was my plan to travel to wherever Bhanaté was in the Orient and spend some time with him. Initially, it was my impression that he was in Bangkok. Upon inquiry of the Wat Po Monastery and of the chief of protocol to the royal family, I was informed that a monk from Delhi had come to visit. Bhanaté and the other fellow were in Delhi although I was not informed where or with whom he was staying.

Checking with the Ashoka Mission that Bhanaté had formed on the land given him by Prime Minister Nehru at the urging of Nehru's mother, I was told that Bhanaté was staying with the monk who brought him back to Delhi. They were not sure where that was.

I checked in to the Taj Mahal hotel in Delhi. The address of Bhanaté's host came to me through usual networking among Bhanaté's students. The next morning I went to the Bellman who also coordinates transportation for guests at the property and asked if he had an English speaking driver available for the day because I had an address but I did not know how to navigate in Delhi nor where I was going. The Sikh fellow looked at the paper and then at me. He told me the place I was looking for was across Shahshahan road, on the other side of a hedge about 100 yards away. It took just a few minutes to get to where Bhanaté was staying even though when I booked the hotel, I did not know where was Bhanaté in all the New Delhi, at that time a city of 7+ million people.

Upon arriving at the apartment, I was met by a female cook and a male attendant / driver. I was initially told that Bhanté was resting. In a short time, the host appeared, one of many monks whom Bhanté had ordained many years before.

For the next three days it became increasingly clear that something was wrong because I was never able to have any time alone with Bhanté. Finally he and I had a few minutes alone. He informed me to follow his lead exactly; to do nothing on my own. He confirmed that the monk / host was holding Bhanté hostage because he wanted Bhanté to sign the deed of the Ashoka Mission land over to him personally rather than to the trust to which it was supposed to go after Bhanté's passing.

The real estate in question is the approximately 10 hectares of land that was donated to Bhanté by Jawaharlal Nehru and on which he founded the Ashoka Mission in the Meroli district of New Delhi. Over time, Bhanté established a place for travelers to stay that was safe. A two hectare garden produced much of what was eaten at the centre. An orchard, library, school for children and meditation center round out the Ashoka complex. Bhanté said the Buddha in the Ashoka Mission library was donated by U Nu and U Thant of Burma. Today, The Ashoka Mission is where certain Tibetans stay when they are in Delhi on behalf of His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso.

Bhanté instructed me to make friends with his captor to fool him into thinking that I was oblivious to his shenanigans. Specifically, I was to go the Khan Market and purchase enough cloth for a robe for the monk/captor as a gift. To curry favor, I purchased 15 yards of 21 momme silk cloth in the Cambodian saffron color (enough for two robes).

Returning to his apartment, I placed the cloth on his bed and retired to the living room or kitchen to await his return. By then, most of my meals were with his staff. Within a few days, our host asked if I had ever been to a Kumbh Mela or to Lucknow where Bhanté initially settled, established a small Vihara, met B K Nehru and cured him of some mystery illness that had long plagued him and resisted treatment.

Bhanté's 'host' was able to get us three tickets on the train to Lucknow (a trip of about 12 and a half hours at that time). The Indian government took over the British Raj administrative buildings. We had the privilege of staying there, about 2 Km from Lucknow at the over sized complex with beautiful flowers in profusion, manicured grounds and attentive staff.

On the second day, word spread that Bhanté had returned. Celebration broke out. In the midst of the momentary pandemonium, Bhanté motions me over and asks me *sotto voce* if I see the man leaning against the wall with the gun. I ask if he means the policeman. He instructs me to ask him to get us three tickets on the express train back to Delhi. The fellow's initial reaction was 'when pigs fly'. In India, you apply for tickets, your credentials are checked, then you are permitted to purchase tickets and board the train. The process takes days. The policeman had a loving wife and family. He said

Bhanté had found him the wife. In return, he somehow got us three sleeping compartment births on the express train to Delhi.

When the train pulled into the New Delhi station, I wanted to make sure it was safe for Bhanté to de-train. Shyam Bhattnagar and Bhanté stayed on the train in the compartment. Shortly after the last person was off the train, the locomotive moved out to a birthing track. There is no platform where the train sat. At least it was on site. Finding the duty station manager's office bustling, I asked Mr Sharma if he would help and he explained to me he was busy doing his job as senior duty station manager. I mentioned that Bhanté had worked with Nehru, Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Patel. Mr Sharma stopped what he was doing and brought a group of porters (Coolies) out to the train. The people formed a human ladder. Bhanté looked at this and refused to put his foot on the shoulder of another person in that way. Eventually, Mr Sharma brought a second train parallel to the first so that Bhanté could be lifted from train A to train B that, in turn, could be rolled back to where a platform was open.

[The New Delhi All India train station handles over 350 trains and 500,000 passengers daily with 16 platforms. Trains often de-train and embark passengers in less than five minutes. The station covers over 30,000 square meters. At the time, probably about the same. The footprint of the Indian National Rail System is essentially what the British turned over to India at the time of its independence.]

Bhanté's long time friends and students, Ram Nath Mishra and his family took us into their home in Delhi. Bhanté was now safely away from his captor although we lacked his ticket, cloths, passport *etc.*

On the following Sunday, Bhanté woke up insistent that he needed a passport. Jan Lipsen in DC was able to identify the duty officer at the American Embassy that day. [Jan had been chief of staff to Mr Carl Albert when he was Speaker of the House of Representatives during President Nixon's term. Her husband Chuck had been in the Justice Department and was advance man for President Lyndon Johnson. Their daughter Linda Lipsen had worked in the Justice Department. Chuck's sister Esther Coopersmith was chief of protocol for President Carter and then America's UNESCO ambassador.]

He opened the Chancery to take Bhanté's application for a new passport as a courtesy to an elder. He made it clear it would take about two weeks to cancel the old passport and get a new passport for Bhanté. After he took the application into the back of the Chancery, he came back in a few minutes and asked if Bhanté had been a guest of the United States State Department in 1957. Bhanté affirmed that he had worked with John Foster Dulles and President Eisenhower before the French withdrew from IndoChina. His goal at that time was to encourage America to stay out of Southeast Asia militarily. In light of his services, he was presented with his passport on the spot with expressions of deep gratitude. On the way out, he leaned over to me and said, again, "you see Russ, I needed passport". Asked why he had not mentioned that he had been a guest of the

State Department, he said simply that we had not asked about that. He only answered the questions asked.

He returned to the Mishra's for a few more days. During one of those days, the disreputable fellow came to visit. He said little, stayed a short time, Bhanaté apologized for any distress he was caused. Dharmavirio slunk out. Bhanaté and I were able to tour the Ashoka Mission together for a day. On another day, Bhanaté hosted a group of monks I think he had ordained at the Mission.

My recollection is that Bhanaté stayed about another week with the Mishra family. Before I left there was an additional episode. A gentleman appeared whose card identified him as a retired Indian Supreme Court justice. Over an evening at his home, he expressed reverence for Bhanaté and his work. While wanting to be 'behind the scenes', he also seemed eager to learn exactly what was going on and what were Bhanaté's plans. The next morning, after showing Bhanaté the fellow's card, he asked, "Do you know the people who have been making mischief." Yes. "If you put all their brains in a teacup, do you think you could find them?" Good point. "Your new friend has been behind all of what has happened. Unfortunately for him, he did not prevail."

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