

Following the Faeces

V. Ramaswamy

I read *Annihilation of Caste*, by Dr B.R. Ambedkar in January 2016. That was occasioned by the publication of the book, *Hatred in the Belly*, by the Ambedkar Age Collective. My dear friend and comrade, Naren, in Hyderabad, who was involved in bringing out the book, had requested me to organise a book-launch event in Kolkata.

The fact that I, as an educated Indian, a former student and teacher of economics, and a grassroots activist-researcher, happened to read this seminal text only when I was fifty-five years old – therein hangs a tale.

But times are changing. And the change is unstoppable.

For me, the most penetrating insight that Dr. Ambedkar provides in *Annihilation of Caste* was contained in these lines:

Few object to liberty in the sense of a right to free movement, in the sense of a right to life and limb. There is no objection to liberty in the sense of a right to property, tools, and materials, as being necessary for earning a living, to keep the body in a due state of health. Why not allow a person the liberty to benefit from an effective and competent use of a person's powers? The supporters of Caste who would allow liberty in the sense of a right to life, limb, and property, would not readily consent to liberty in this sense, inasmuch as it involves liberty to choose one's profession.

But to object to this kind of liberty is to perpetuate slavery. For slavery does not merely mean a legalized form of subjection. It means a state of society in which some men are forced to accept from others the purposes which control their conduct. This condition obtains even where there is no slavery in the legal sense. It is found where, as in the Caste System, some persons are compelled to carry on certain prescribed callings which are not of their choice.

It cut through all my ignorance, confusions, vacillations like a blade of diamond. It was clear to me now that 'caste' was an inseparable part of pre-India's hoary past. But it can have no place in an India of the future. 'India' – has no past. India – is nothing. Any 'India' can only be a vision of the future. A future enabled by Dr. Ambedkar through his steering of the drafting of the Constitution of India through thick and thin, which he delivered to the people of India. That is a promise of a future. India really begins on 26 January 1950.

Many years from now, when the history of a future India is written, the last 70+ years of 'India', which we are so full off, would merit less than a footnote.

That same year, in 2016, I was fortunate to be asked to take up a study-assignment on urban sanitation in Tamil Nadu. The study was supposed to be a means to inform policy and state intervention. I felt hesitant about taking that up, given my lack of awareness or experience regarding Tamil Nadu, and my rusty Tamil. But thanks to the partnership of my old comrade and friend, V. Srinivasan, I did, and it was a truly inspired effort on the part of two people who were wedded to the cause of the marginal and disenfranchised citizens of our benighted country. Srini and I had been fellow-activists in the National Campaign for Housing Rights in the late-1980s. He is a trade union organiser, human rights activist and farmer, based in Chennai. His experience, knowledge and contacts made me feel like I was sitting on the shoulders of a powerful genie.

During April-May 2016, Srini and I toured a few districts of Tamil Nadu. This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me. When the study was completed, I felt that someone like me was truly fortunate to have had such an opportunity. I was overwhelmed and humbled.

I became interested in the issue of 'manual scavenging' in 1993. I came across a newspaper report which revealed that the Ministry of Welfare of the Government of India which had brought in the new law, *The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993*, had written to the chief secretaries of all the states of India about this new law, and sought their responses. Apparently, almost no one even knew about it. Soon after that, I assisted the Institute of Local Government and Urban Studies, in Calcutta, to develop communication materials about the Govt. of India's Urban Basic Services for the Poor (UBSP). West Bengal was one of the first states to act on the new law, and it was incumbent on the local body to amend its bylaws, to include a new clause pertaining to dry latrines and manual scavengers, in order to be eligible for financial assistance for the latrine conversion. During 1995-97, I was a member of the Calcutta Environmental Management Strategy & Action Plan, or CEMSAP project team of the Govt of West Bengal. I was part of the Social Development group, led by Dr. Chandan Sengupta of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. We were meant to look at the impact of environmental degradation in metropolitan Calcutta on the poor and vulnerable, and to make recommendations towards integrating the addressal of this in planned interventions. That had also been an inspired partnership, between Chandan-da and me. I tried to harness all my knowledge, experience and associations since my entry into social activism in 1984, when I joined the Chinnamul Sramajibi Adhikar Samiti (Organisation for the Rights of Uprooted Labouring People), a recently formed umbrella of squatter communities across Calcutta and activists. This was formed in the backdrop of a wave of eviction of squatters in the city since 1983. As it happened, Chandan-da, a respected teacher of sociology and researcher, had recently worked on a project studying community environmental management. We jointly authored the Community Environmental Management Strategy as well as the Community Environmental Management Programme prepared under the CEMSAP project. In early 1997, I was responsible for carrying out some community-based improvements in a few basti

clusters in Howrah. That was to demonstrate the implementation of the recommendations made by us, via a 'pilot project'. Among the interventions on the ground was conversions of dry latrines (requiring manual scavenging) into sanitary latrines. Driven by seeing the wretched conditions on the ground, I saw to it that we demonstrated a sustainable, low-cost means to eliminate the problem. The CEMSAP project eventually came to nothing, thanks to bureaucratic ineptitude. But building on the groundwork done, I initiated the formation of a grassroots organisation, called Howrah Pilot Project, based in Priya Manna Basti, in Howrah, with a vision of a long-term programme of community renewal. And we attempted to scale-up our dry latrine conversion demonstration towards a programme to eliminate dry latrines in the bastis of Howrah. But that came to naught, thanks to vested interests in the local body who were siphoning off the central govt's subsidy for latrine conversion.

Meanwhile, following a public interest litigation initiated by the Safai Karmachari Andolan, the issue of 'manual scavenging' had reached the Supreme Court, which made a landmark ruling on the subject in 2014. Before that, the Govt of India had enacted a new law, *The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013*.

This was the backdrop in which I took up the study-assignment in Tamil Nadu. Quite naturally then, given our activist orientation, and the 20-year 'career' of state intervention in regard to manual scavenging, Srini and I focussed our attention on the question: *why does manual scavenging exist in Tamil Nadu today?*

We followed the faeces.

We wrote a deeply-researched and hard-hitting report. As it happened, on the very morning I sat down, in Chennai, to write the final report, the newspapers reported some more deaths of manual scavengers in Tamil Nadu. We studied scholarly books and articles as well as media reports. We looked at Census and Anthropological Survey publications. But more importantly, we also interviewed a host of people and informants – all magically enabled by

Srini – and especially past and present manual scavengers and conservancy workers in local bodies. We also met and spoke to the families of workers who had died while undertaking manual scavenging.

This was a deeply significant experience for me. I was born in a Tamil brahmin family. The word in Tamil for sweeper that I grew up learning, *thoti*, whose very pronunciation conveyed despise, towards people for whom there was a separate stairway – was the name for a community of my fellow citizens. The study had enabled me to meet, talk to, and make common cause with. I was truly grateful to have had the opportunity to do this at this stage in my life.

India eliminated untouchability by law, but not caste. However, the other side of caste is the notion of purity and pollution. And so, untouchability has been alive and well in the Indian republic.

Our study report was actually very focussed on practical aspects, on the ground. We had concluded that the septic tanks that had been built in urbanising Tamil Nadu (the most urbanised state in India) in the last few decades were largely improper. Our recommendations included retrofitting septic tanks, incorporating new and stringent guidelines in urban local bodies pertaining to septic tank construction, and a host of efforts at various levels aimed at ending manual scavenging.

We wrote an article in *Refugee Watch* titled, “Why does manual scavenging exist in Tamil Nadu today?” That was published in 2017. And we presented a paper titled “The Role of the State in Urban Violence against Marginalized Castes: Manual Scavenging in India Today”, which was presented at the Sixth Critical Studies Conference, on the theme ‘Refugees, Migrants, Violence and the Transformation of Cities’, organised by the Calcutta Research Group the same year.

But most of all, this experience revealed to me that the cause and the solution to the problem Srinii and I had studied lay in that very insight Dr. Ambedkar had provided in *Annihilation of Caste*.

Caste has enabled India to be subsidised by the ignominy and suffering of its 'untouchables'. But for them, the most basic aspect of human existence, defecation, could not proceed. But that is achieved by making humans beings into human faeces, humans reduced to excreta.

The 'republic' is a lie. It has been a daylight robbery. 'Manual scavenging' – is part of our past, and our present. Only a future can be free of that curse of caste society. And thus enable all that such unfettering could bring. India can only be about the future.

The youth of India are its future. For me, the story of Rohith Vemula was about the critical mass that educated Dalit youth in the country are nearing. All the powers that had to come down upon that starry-eyed young man, reminding one of William Congreve's expression, 'hell hath no fury like ...' Ever since I read *Annihilation of Caste*, I have nursed a vision, or a dream.

How many students belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes enter college every year for undergraduate studies?

My dream is that – in *every* college that a student belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes enters in India, or at least in *one* college – on her/his very first day s/he is greeted by a Friend, who invites and welcomes her/him to the 'Ambedkar Cell', and there, s/he is introduced to *Annihilation of Caste*. There, s/he senses a new home, a true home, a worthy home, for her / his being. Through the years of her/his college-going, s/he would keep attending the *Annihilation of Caste* study and discussion sessions. So that s/he carries, engages with and unleashes the powerful germ of this incendiary text through her/his education, career and life.

Work Cited

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Author Information

V. Ramaswamy is a translator and activist based in Kolkata. His email id is rama.sangye@gmail.com.