

All-Encompassing Inclusion is possible: an example

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My last piece in this column said some not very flattering things about a sister math institute of mine, also in Chennai. Let me attempt at least partial atonement this time around by singing the praises of a mathematician there, who is a truly inclusive soul, acutely aware of all the unfair inequalities that our society dumps on its less privileged, and devotes generously of his time, energy and resources (not only money) in trying to improve their lot. His intense solidarity with the Dalits (or ‘untouchables’ as they have been constantly called as proof of the immense castism and exclusivity that forms the fabric of Indian society) may be treated lightly only at your peril. He has consciously tried to understand just what the Buddhist alternative meant to these unfortunate victims of an obscenely caste/class-conscious society.

Shiva, for that is what he is called, involves himself with single-minded commitment, along with some like-minded philanthropists in raising money to help the lives of at least a minute fraction of the downtrodden. He champions the cause of people who get a raw deal from life, which dubs them low-born untouchables purely on account of the accident that their parents had the same misfortune.

Let me give an instance of the sort of cause he tries to raise public awareness in. This concerns the unholy practice in India of having an abundance of ‘dry latrines’ in public spaces, typically like train stations. While in the west, a person is liable to be penalised for not removing the poop deposited in public places by his pet dog, the idea behind our system of dry latrines is that people come and deposit their own poop at strategic intervals in a big bare room, to be scraped away and the floor cleaned before future use by subsequent poopers. And no prizes for guessing who has to shovel the s... : your local untouchable! To be sure, a law has been passed that this practice of ‘dry latrines’ is illegal, but really, who gives a s...? The fact remains that many a little Indian girl, not yet ten years old, has to spend many hours a day cleaning the disgusting mess from dry latrines, only to be recompensed the royal equivalent of a few pennies for having surrendered what should have been a care-free and happy day, playing with friends, in the life of an innocent young lass in school, if only she had been fortunate enough to be born in a civiised society. Why her? Because of her crime of having been born into a family who will only be permitted to perform this task by our society - in this 21st century of i-pads, i-pods and (not necessarily i-)phones!

He and his comrade Benjamin have been on this self-appointed crusade for years now. They periodically circulate emails to friends and acquaintances asking for further contributions for one thing or another: it may be for housing and educating some *karmacharis* (as the people doomed to shovel s... because of the origin of their birth are euphemistically called by our shamelessly hypocritical society); or it may be for the upkeep of a hostel in Chennai or somewhere in Andhra. While Ben lives in the US, he and Shiva in India (and possibly others whom I am unaware of) have managed to raise donations from and social awareness in hordes of people. The list of of their regular donors reads almost like a roll-call of accomplished mathematicians from all over the world: you will find the Americans Mumford and

Arveson, the non-resident Indians Raghavan Narasimhan and Gadde Anand Swarup, and many resident Indians like Alladi Sitaram, Gadadhar Misra and yours truly - and of course (Benjamin and) Shiva himself!

The man's social conscience is a revelation. Let me give just three instances:

- When the CMI campus started coming up in Siruseri. it was an arid dusty plot of land. Shiva has played a leading role in 'greening' the place, getting almost every visitor to the institute to plant a tree there; bottom line, CMI now looks more like the Garden of Eden than a place for grooming future Ramanujans! And in this whole greening process, you can be sure he has always been aware of and trying to better the standards of the 'working staff' (gardeners, drivers, cooks, security guards,...)
- To Shiva, this 'working staff' is not an anonymous collection of people (as they would almost surely be, to many of the 'high-brow intellectuals'). For instance, there is a gardener there who is practically a 'deaf mute' as our society would bill him. Shiva overcame all sorts of bureaucratic tangles to ensure that Mohiuddin's meager income could be enhanced to the princely sum of Rs. 7000 a month, which helps him contribute to running a family of mother, sisters, their families, etc. Shiva took it on himself to learn the signing conventions followed by Mohiuddin, who indicated to me that there are now only some three or four people in all of CMI who try to communicate with him.
- Shiva was also telling me of this quite severely disabled person called Narasimhan, who has been the victim of the double whammy of polio and leprosy, who normally sits outside a certain bank. You should see the evident delight in Shiva's description of Narasimhan's apparently supremely cheerful personality in the face of all his problems. Something Shiva's wife once said about a summer being more uncomfortable than normal was the impetus needed for him to go buy a fan and gift it to this Narasimhan.

I have known Shiva professionally for decades, but it is only in the past decade or so - after I moved to Chennai from Bangalore - that I have had occasion to witness his all-encompassing compassion. Ever since I have been writing my column, he has been a great motivator. It was he who asked me to write something about the visibility impaired, he who tried to help me get to meet Mohiuddin in my attempts to be able to write something on the travails of hearing impaired people. His latest email to me had this inspiring exhortation:

I wish you would also one day write about the great psychological disability that untouchability causes, and the many steep steps that a person deemed untouchable must negotiate lifelong in this society.

Let me conclude with a knee-jerk reaction to this wish:

- I feel like a spoilt brat for making such a fuss about the problems of inaccessibility I face, privileged as I am to be chauffeured around and driving around on a motorised

wheel-chair, whereas the Mohiuddins and several karmachari children continue to uncomplainingly lead their lives.

- I hope this article, while probably not quite what Shiva might have liked to see, nevertheless rings true, and at least partially addresses his italicised request above - which, incidentally, could clearly only have been made by a truly all-embracing and enlightened soul.
- I am truly fortunate to call this wonderful human being my friend.