



By DALE LUIS MENEZES


Tejas Express: Public Property and Civic Duties

The high-speed, high-tech Tejas Express, plying between Bombay and Goa, was launched a couple of weeks ago. The launch of this train was much hyped because it offered state-of-the-art facilities to the passengers. The Tejas Express boasts of automatic doors, infotainment screens, vacuum bio-toilets, touch-free taps in the toilets, and much more. While the train's maiden voyage was expected to be a triumphant heralding of a new era in rail transportation, the news that filtered in afterwards suggested otherwise.

It was reported that even before the journey began in Bombay, a window pane was smashed. By the time the train reached Goa 12 headsets were reported to be missing or stolen; there was garbage littered all over the train, and the toilets were also reported to be filthy. Opinion-makers reacted stating that Indians do not deserve nice things and lack the civic sense to take care of public property. Given the manner in which urban Indian liberals are blind to the most fundamental problems of the society, it was not surprising to observe that absence of civic sense being discussed without reference to caste.

The Indian Railways is said to be the largest employer of manual scavengers in the country – under the guise of employing sweepers – as contract workers across the length of the rail network. Almost all of these people who dispose human waste with their bare hands come from the Dalit castes. Though manual scavenging has been outlawed by law since a long time ago, the Indian Railways only started addressing the issue – albeit incompletely – from 2016. In other words, if the railway platforms and tracks bear the slightest resemblance of 'clean' it is only because of the thankless and demeaning labour provided by thousands of workers from such castes. If guests on board the maiden journey of the Tejas Express had left behind garbage and dirty toilets and/or wash-basins it was only to be expected as that is how things are done – it is simply someone else's problem.

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The South Asian idea of cleanliness is that someone else is responsible for doing the cleaning. While it is true that the authorities are responsible for collecting and disposing of garbage, there is no justification for collecting wet waste in plastic bags and dumping them along the side of roads, for someone else to collect. There is blindness to the fact that the labour provided come from persons who are denied the basic right of human dignity, let alone benefits like health insurance and proper working conditions. This is a problem that concerns not only the government but everybody.

This behavior with regards to disposing garbage tells us something about the way in which Indians approach public spaces and public property. On the one hand, one doesn't view public spaces and public property as deserving care and maintenance. On the other hand, the full burden of maintaining public spaces and property is dumped (pun intended) on the members of the most discriminated-against strata of society, who, not ironically, are excluded and pushed either to the margins or outside the boundaries of villages and cities. There is simply an absence of a 'collective feeling' or of a 'community' when the issue of public spaces emerges. The reason many argue, is the existence of the caste division. (In fact it was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who argued that it was impossible to build a common community in the form of a nation when thousands of castes or *jatis* were in existence in British India).

In a slightly different context, the theologian Philip Vinod Peacock in his essay 'Hostility, Hypocrisy, Hospitality: Rethinking the Politics of Theology and Hospitality from a Dalit Perspective' (2013), offers an interesting suggestion to understand the relationship that Indians share with public spaces. Peacock suggests that public spaces, containing hundreds or thousands of people unfamiliar to us, tend to be sites of repelling strangers: "Within the caste system all strangers are automatically considered to be lower in the caste hierarchy than oneself." Public spaces therefore are sites where aggressive behavior is displayed or performed that goes against any form of civil behavior, in response to the underlying structures of casteism. Thus, he further suggests that "it is perhaps this logic or spirit [of the caste system] that is at work when Indians jump queues or push themselves before others, or basically choose not to follow the norms of what can be considered publicly acceptable behavior".

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Peacock's suggestion can be used to argue that the physical location of public spaces – be they parks, roads, beaches, trains or anything else – are sites or spaces wherein the development of civic sense is constantly subverted because we are unable to relate to one another as persons outside of our narrow and individualistic identities. There is something that prevents us from being publicly-oriented citizens. Being in a public space leaves us supposedly vulnerable to physical overpowering, caste pollution, and even diseases. This is the reason why public property is often repeatedly vandalized or left to decay without any care. In many ways, it can be argued that a sense and concept of the 'public' is yet to evolve within Indian society.

The unfortunate episode of the Tejas Express is not an aberration; in fact, one of the maintenance staff remarked that the amount of garbage left behind was just like any other train. As expected the educated, 'middle class' who can afford such expensive fares are the ones who are causing all the problems.

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