

Painful Universe of Dalits. The strong life of the “untouchable” in Kolkata, India

The caste system in India, strictly based on heredity, constitutes for thousands of years the foundation of the Hindu society. Castes - based on the concept that persons are not equal- were formally abolished by the constitution of 1950, yet continue to regulate de facto the lives of hundreds of millions of Indians. At the margins of the four official castes, those of the Brahmins, the priests, those of warriors and nobles, those of merchants and craftsmen and those of laborers and artisans, the dark and suffering universe of the ‘untouchables’ begins. 180 million people in India alone, of which around 800 thousand in Kolkata, are genetically doomed to a life of suffering and humiliation. They are relegated by their status to carry out the jobs that Hindus consider unclean and contaminating. Processing of animal skins, garbage collection, maintenance of sewers, handling dead bodies in the crematories or hospitals, are jobs that in India only ‘Dalits’, - oppressed, as the untouchables call themselves- can do.

A condition of painful social subjugation that, over the centuries, has exposed them, and still exposes them to violence and abuse of all kinds, usually without the authorities, except in special cases, giving them any help. The case of the two teenagers raped and hanged some years ago in a poor village in Uttar Pradesh makes no exception. Many Dalits are killed or seriously injured every year, especially in the countryside, where 70 % of the Indian population lives, often only for breaking the harsh social segregation rules to which they are subjected.

Great metropolis, especially Mumbai, New Delhi and Kolkata, represent a “refuge” for the untouchables, somehow protected and camouflaged by the multitudes of people who live there. In Kolkata, in the state of West Bengal, Dalits live in dilapidated popular neighborhoods that the government has assigned for them. Alternatively, they live in unhealthy slums, where even running water in the house can be an unattainable luxury. In the city you find them in the streets or in large landfills to collect garbage on behalf of the government, which is a degraded form of employment. They are found in the medieval “brick factory” as well, many of which are located along the banks of the Ganges in the outskirts of the city. They work in tanneries breathing pestilential stench of leather, or, with more dignity, in laboratories that produce low-cost footwear. They are employed in activities such as the cremation of bodies itself, or in their management of these within hospitals and morgues. Despite some parties that represent them, as well as some associations that aim at promoting their social redemption, the Dalits rarely get to occupy important posts in the public service sector, where the most influential positions have always been occupied by members of the upper castes.

This is a social anomaly of extraordinary dimensions, that no one in India, including Gandhi, has ever really tried to heal. The ruthless rigidity of the caste system is in fact in the Hindu society a powerful factor of stability which no “traditional” politician seems to want to give up. The Dalits are in fact alone in their struggle for liberation, but by no means did they decide to give up.



In Kolkata thousands of people during the night sleep in the streets. The West Bengal Capital is a “refuge city” for many dalit ascped from another indian states.



Richard Lojiress is a Dalit that works like scavenger in a hotel located in the tourist area of the city. He does not have his own home, sleeping in a niche in the enclosure wall of the hotel itself.



Children play cricket in the dalit slum of Chitpur. Located in the central part of the city this slum was partially destroyed in 2019 by a disastrous fire.



The majority of people that collect garbage in the Kolkata's streets are Dalits. All activities involving contact with waste in India can only be carried out by Dalits.



Dalit woman worker in a bricks factory, outskirts of Kolkata. In the brick factories located along the banks of the Hooghly River (a branch of the Ganges), Dalit women are often subjected to sexual harassment and abuse.



Dalit slum of Tangra district. Open sewers, environmental degradation and total absence of services characterize the totality of the slums where the Dalits live.



A Dalit child picks up plastic bottles near a train station. A lot of street children in Kolkata are Dalits. This often makes them vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse.



Dalit workers in a bricks factory, outskirts of Kolkata. The living and working conditions inside the brick factories are extremely harsh. Dalit workers, often women, spend most of their lives inside the factory, never leaving it.



Two Dalits, a man and a woman, work on the maintenance of a sewer on a city street. This type of occupation in India can only be carried out by those belonging to what is considered a 'lower' caste.



Young dalit works in the "Garbage Mountain", Kolkata's most important dumpfile. The very high rate of pollution of this landfill, where toxic gases are continually produced due to garbage fires, makes this work very dangerous for health.



A musahar (mouses eater), a dalit sub-caste, woman with his son eats on the street. The members of this sub-caste, the last of the last, live by feeding on the scraps of restaurants or markets, or on the food they find among the waste in the streets of the city.



A bricks factory, outskirts of Kolkata. In these factories, which are generally located on the banks of the Hougly River, a branch of the Ganges, not only Dalit but also Muslims belonging to the poorer social classes work.



Dalit woman worker in a bricks factory, outskirts of Kolkata. Traditionally it is mainly Dalit women who work, even hours a day, in this type of factory.



The “red block”, popular palaces, are assigned by Indian Government to the dalit people. Without services, poorly connected by public transport and far from the city center, these neighborhoods are in fact real ghettos. Despite this the living conditions are better than those of the many Dalits who live in the slums of the city.



Dalit workers in a tannery, Park Circus district. The contact with bovine and animal skins in general is considered an impure activity by the Hindu religion. And as such entrusted exclusively to the Dalits.



Portrait of Dalit workers in a tannery, Park Circus district. In the leather tanneries the working conditions are in most cases terrible. Both for the unbearable smell of the partially decomposed hides themselves, and for the use of toxic chemicals necessary for their preparation.



Dalit people by Rajabazar district dalit slum. Here live also many poor muslim people. The slum dwellings were created from the stables where the English occupants kept their horses.



A Dalit woman candidate by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in the Chidiamore "Gokhana" Dalit slum.



Dr. Ramu Ram, a Dalit responsible of the Anthropological Survey of India library at Kolkata Indian Museum. An exception in a Public Administration in which the members of this minority have very little space and never in a prominent position.



In the Kolkata University Campus it's strong the memory of Rovhith Vemula, 26 years old, who attended the second year of PhD in Science at Hyderabad Central University, in the state of Telangana. Dalit, Rohith Vemula killed himself hanging after the academic administration had cut off the subsidies that allowed him to continue his studies.



Dalit women at a political demonstration for the 120th birth anniversary of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the most important dalit political leader. Near Chidiamore "Gokhana" dalit slum.



A Dalit girl looks out from her home built on the railroad fence in Crematory Slum.



Near the Ganga Crematory many Dalit people in the night receive food by religious care organizations.t



Dalit people in the Crematory slum, surrounding the railway line.



A Dalit government employee by Chidiamore “Gokhana” dalit slum. Although some Indian laws impose a percentage of Dalits in the Public Administration, their number is in reality very low.



A Dalit school by the Chidiamore “Gokhana” dalit slum. Dalit children can only attend institutions reserved for them. Where all the teachers are also Dalits.



Dalit woman woman cooks in front of her house in the Crematory slum, surrounding the railway line.



A Dalit family on the door of your home in the Chidiamore "Gokhana" dalit slum.



A child in the dalit slum of Chitpur. Located in the central part of Kolkata, in this slum children attend schools reserved only for Dalits.



In Dalit slums, as in almost all of those in Kolkata, since running water is not available, the necessary water is collected from public fountains on the street, using tanks of all kinds.



Dalit young workers at Kolkata SSKM Hospital Morgue. No Hindu belonging to the “upper” class would ever accept such a job in India.



Dalit worker in the Ganga Crematory. The manipulation of corpses is an activity that in India can only be carried out by the Dalits, being considered impure and contaminating by the Hindu religion.



Between the hindus people. only Dalit people can be cobblers. Contact with animal skins, in particular with bovine skins, is in fact considered by this religion to be “impure” and entrusted only to the Dalits.



Dalit young worker at Kolkata SSKM Hospital Morgue. This boy has been working in the morgue, in completely precarious conditions of hygiene and safety, since the age of sixteen.

Roberto Nistri. Professional Biography

An international Photography Awards Winner is a Roman graduated in Biological Sciences at the University "La Sapienza" of Rome, who has transformed since more than fifteen years his passion for photography into a career. At the beginning as a wildlife photographer. Then, extending his professional prospects to documentary photography.

As a professional photographer who worked with a large number of journals and periodicals, Italian and international, Hundreds of his photos have been published around the world, on websites, magazines and books through the international agencies "Alamy.com" and "Pictures Alliance". He has also collaborated with several Italian public entities, including the Lazio Region, the University of Rome "Tor Vergata", the Friuli Museum of Natural History and the Italian Ministry of Environment.

For years, he organizes courses in photography, exhibitions and workshops, both in Italy and abroad. In his many travels he has focused on the documentation of ethnic groups and peoples who are threatened by progress and by particular political and social conditions, in recent years in Ethiopia, Kenya, India, Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Croazia, North Ireland and Lebanon.

He has made the long-term photographic project "In the Wild World of Writers," for which he took with a "naturalistic" attitude a large number of portraits of the most famous Italian narrators and storytellers. The project became an exhibition that opened in November 2013 to Palaexpo of Rome and exhibited in other major Italian locations, and enclosed in a book published by Palombi Editori.

He is (December, 2013) the winner of the award "Best Single Image in a Portfolio (Vanishing Cultures & Emerging)" and of Portfolio (Monochromal) of "Travel Photographer Of The Year Awards 2013". He has contributed in July 2014 at Royal Photographic Society, International Print Exhibition 157, in London and in others four locations in the UK. Third place, "Professional" People Life Style category in Moscow International Foto Awards '14 Competition.

The images of his long-term photographic project "Survivors of Modernity. Visions from past worlds", were exhibited in 2013 at the MAP (Museo Agro Pontino) in Pontinia (LT); in 2014 at the "Terre di Confine Museum" in Sonnino (LT), in 2015 at the Palazzo Lanfranchi Museum in Matera and in 2019 at the MAC (Maja Arte Contemporanea) gallery in Rome.