

Book Review

A Critical Analysis of *Dans la peau d'un intouchable* (In The Skin of An Untouchable) By Marc Boulet

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Romain Gary, one of my favourite French writers of Russian origin said, "La France a ce qu'il y a de plus beau dans le monde" (France has the best things in the world). Arguably Marc Boulet like the majority of the French men is well nourished and well brought up in the Parisian comforts. One day he wakes up to an idea to metamorphose himself, temporarily though, as an aboriginal untouchable Indian beggar "to go deep into the human misery to understand it better." A volley of misery in one go... The mere thought of it gives goose bumps to many of us! One can imagine how difficult it must have been for him to convince himself at all human levels namely physical, mental, social, intellectual, psychological and spiritual. Many a sleepless nights must have been spent before actually slipping into the skin of his new avatar.

The book written like a personal diary starts on 7th February 1992 and ends on 6th January 1993. It actually reminded me of a song I had heard as a child, which goes something like this: "365 days in a man's life that means a lot..."

The song has never been so apt than for Marc Boulet. In a short span of around one year he had to learn Hindi, change the colour of his skin and hair using chemicals and pills, wear the dirtiest of clothes, eat, drink, and sleep not only with the poorest of the poor but also with the rats, pigs and dogs. Disillusioned and disgusted with his humiliating and unbearable sufferings he thought of ending his life but restrained from doing so for his loved ones. He then decides to return to France finding only pain and "no hidden pleasures".

In the initial stage of the book, I had a mixed-sympathic-antipathic- feeling towards the author who risked his health and life to darken his skin by using methoxypsoraline(long term use can cause cancer), silver nitrate, Biafine cream, tanning lotion, etc. I said to myself he must have made some serious mistakes in his past life that he was cursed to go through the worst things in life in spite of the fact that he was born to the best things. Otherwise couldn't he have found some other way to become rich and famous? On second thought his words like "this is not an attempt to get cheap publicity, it is an affair between the poor and me, it is an adventure to discover the unknown pleasures of the untouchable, if it exists..." made me look at the author and the book from a different angle. And then it is always easier to adjust to an upper ladder of a society from a lower ladder than the other way round. He could have also been taken for a spy or an imposter and could have landed up in an infested Indian prison cell the rest of his life. The fact that he followed the difficult path has also made me put him on a higher pedestal. Undoubtedly a hidden sincerity was apparent in each word and act. I then started reading the book between the lines...

India still remains a mystery and an enigma to most of the Westerners. Even Mark Twain has not been able to give such a first-hand, objective, unbiased picture of India like Marc Boulet. An imaginary

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story can go wild and far and can be weaved even more beautifully than an experienced one. Experiences are sometimes so beautiful or painful that the words are not sufficient to express them. But Boulet with the agility of a journalist proved himself as the best spokesperson that the untouchables and beggars can ever imagine of. It is a pity that they are mostly illiterate and can't read his book.

The *shudras* who are fourth in the *varna* born out of the feet of Brahma. But the untouchables are inferior to them and are not even listed in the Hindu caste order. As the author says "the worst hybride (as per the mythology the first untouchable was born of an illegal union of a shudra and a Brahman) is ranked among the dogs and pigs." Or you may call them the dirtiest of the shudras who work as sweepers, linen washers; people who work at the crematorium and cemeteries, cobblers, and the palm tree wine drawers... In short they and the aboriginals of India put together make a quarter of the total population of India. A colossal number and a shocking discovery for many readers! In addition to that India has around one and a half million beggars to its credit! So to get the author accepted among the new caste-profession-nationality that he has opted for, he decided to become a Munda, an untouchable aboriginal from Bihar.

While learning the Hindi language the author realized that even though "the sounds of the words are different, the Indians think like us, the French." To prove his idea he cites some lines from a Hindi detective novel entitled *The Hands of Death* where they talk of adultery, infidelity, and homosexuality. Same language, same vices. That gave him some confidence to undertake his difficult journey to the world of mystery, misery and humiliation.

Finally with a fair knowledge of Hindi and a bag full of courage and doubts in his mind the author along with his wife, Gloire, landed up at the Delhi Airport on a hot-sultry day in the month of July 1992. Delhi seemed to him like a "farm with its cows, cow-shits, urine and stool of human beings who were freely using the open space to relieve themselves."

His real destination was Benaras, the Mecca of the Hindus who go there to wash their sins, to die My personal impression of Benaras is that of Mark Twain and of Larry Tremblay. Mark Twain said, "It was older than the History, older than the traditions, older than the legends, and seemed two times older than the above three put together." In Larry's words, "Benaras is not made of houses, streets, temples, men, women, and children. It is made of some ingredients like wood, mud, water, and death. The main activity of the people apart from worshipping gods consists of dying or burning the dead ones. Benaras is the city from where one can feel closely the mystery of death." I totally agree with Twain's statement on the Ganges at the Holy city. He said, "I think no self-respecting germ would live in such water." I being an Indian refused to touch the water there fearing that I may have to cut of my fingers. My fear was reinforced seeing the unholy people dipping into the 'holy' water after pushing away the dead bodies floating next to them. It was a sordid sight that I will never forget in my life. But what else can you expect from a city as old as Babylon.

Marc Boulet chooses Benaras as he thought it is the perfect city to beg and to live in incognito with human sea from all corners of the world pouring in and out all the time. And it is also the city where all possible miseries in the world culminate. He rented an apartment in a posh colony called Ravindrapuri. His idea was to study the culture, the language, the daily life of untouchables from a close range. Ravindrapuri or Chandigarh, India being the land of extreme contrasts has no problem of finding a slum next to any of its rich modern cities. Two hundred meters away from his residence he found a slum of sweepers who lived in utterly miserable hutments with pigs and rats like any other slums of India. No dearth of equality in misery !

His training ground was Ravindrapuri from where with the help of two tutors he improved his Hindi and also learned the problems involved in the daily existence of untouchables living in the slums by befriending them, eating and drinking with them in their unbelievably dirty huts. When Marc Boulet talked about the problem of hygiene, female infanticide, system of dowry, inequality between man and woman, hypocrisy in the name of religion, oppression of the downtrodden, violence against the helpless, there was nothing absolutely new in what he said but it was like someone holding a mirror in front of you to show the stark reality of life which you have been trying to ignore conveniently. Can we call it a land of civilized and sage people when we urinate, shit, spit and spread our mucus in public giving a damn to others sentiments and feelings? The notion of public hygiene is something unheard of in India. The Hinduism doesn't teach charity as in Christianity nevertheless it emphasizes on Karma. Are we so selfish that we forget to keep our brethren in mind when we carry out our karmas? How can we call it a country of non-violence when a strong young man beats up an old mad helpless woman for a trivial issue at a railway station and nobody reacts to it? It seems to me that in India violence is the solution to all the problems and this society is undoubtedly the most violent on earth. The powerful treat the poor like the slaves. The Indian tolerance is only a total indifference to others problems. I was dismayed to hear an European criticizing India for its violence as we Indians get palpitation thinking of the violence and the inhuman acts committed during the Holocaust and also during the European colonization when so called civilized nations carried out some of the most barbaric acts of cruelty on the natives. That does not give free hand to anyone to bring violence into his or her daily life. In fact, the battle of existence is the mother of all battles. Hence the violence committed in daily life is more painful.

Isn't then the author justified when he says, "India is a land of selfish, intolerant, hierarchical, brutal, humiliating peoples and Hinduism is a cruel, unequal and a self-centered religion." He said this from his bitter experiences during the tenure of his metamorphosis. In fact if we look at the day-to-day existence of the people from a close range, the attitude of each one is for oneself and God is for all is a very selfish approach to life to escape from one's duties towards the less fortunate.

The day of his metamorphosis was like that of Jesus on the Mount Olive. A very painful act to carry out. Begging is difficult and begging in a poor country is even more difficult. Thinking of his task ahead he lost his appetite, sleep, and became nervous and anxious. Hence he says, "I am not exaggerating, I am very scared. Is it going to be the worst experience of my life?" Finally he puts on the uniform of the beggar, a lungi, a banyan, a shirt and a scarf around his neck. He also had his "potli" to carry a pencil and a notebook to write his experiences, a mirror to see the colour of his skin, a razor, a begging bowl and a bed sheet to sleep in the night. He had planned to beg at the railway station. In the night of 29th October 1992 disguised as a beggar he walked to the station and joined a band of about two hundred people sleeping on the pavement without any shelter. It was impossible for him to get any sleep with all sorts of noises around. The animals like pigs and dogs, which were licking his feet, also disturbed him. I was in such a miserable state that only a pig was interested in me. In the morning he felt like smoking a *biri* and having a tea. Even though he had some money with him he restrained from spending it, as he had not earned anything from begging and hence had no right for anything. I am not a masochist but I have to follow the rules if I have to discover the sensations of an Indian beggar. If we had such commitment to our cause we would have been a progressive nation by now.

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He went from compartment to compartment begging and pleading. But without any success. Nobody took any pity on him. He continued and persisted until he received something. It was a question of life and death for him. He had to live on charity. The first alms he received were 20 paise. That was only equivalent to 4 centimes but it gave me the hope that I can live in the skin of Ram Munda. After begging in two trains he earned around 1 rupee 50 paise. Around noon he was hungry and thirsty but had to satisfy himself by drinking the tap water and smoking biri to reduce his hunger. Then by lunch time he earned around 6 rupees which was enough to have some lentils and rice. It was a fantastic meal. I discovered that when one is hungry and one doesn't know when one will get the next meal, the simplest of the food could make a man happy. A good meal is a meal that can satisfy your stomach and head. After lunch he continued begging till crepuscule. The total earning of the day was 10 rupees and 60 paise. The days when he couldn't not earn enough to buy his food he had to have *the khichari* from the nearby temples where he had to even fight for a plate made of leaves. For Marc Boulet it was an experience and an experiment. But think of the millions who have to undergo this pathetic situation all their lives.

After 15 days of begging and its related humiliating, exasperating experiences he needed a break. He went back home to the greatest delight of his wife who all these days was waiting for him with baited breath. He came back after three days to continue his mission. On his return he had to fight for a place to sleep, to beg, to eat, to exist even in that miserable condition. According to him the root cause of the miseries of the untouchables comes from the Hindu religion, which divides men into superior and inferior beings by their birth and not by their merits. The West is rightly fighting against the racism and the anti-Semitism in the world, but they are indulgent on the caste issue and treat it as an Indian cultural heritage like the Taj Mahal. It is surprising that the caste system in India doesn't shock them.

A month in the skin of Ram Munda was equal to the sufferings of many years and many lives. The life had become intolerable for him. He wondered how Indians are accepting this kind of life. To express his dismay he says, "I often ask myself if a life of this kind is worth living." Here I felt Marc Boulet failed to understand the human psyche. The comparisons make life hell. In fact I would say that comparisons are the cause of all miseries and not desires, as Gautum Buddha said. He had a better life to compare to. So his sufferings were more unbearable than that of his born untouchable co-beggars. They had lived nothing better and probably never will.

But I agree with Boulet when he says that the Indians lack a sense of national pride. They treat themselves as a part of a region, a religion or a caste but hardly in terms of an Indian. Like others he also felt deep inside him like an untouchable but not like an Indian.

He could not bear his life on the Ghats of Benaras anymore and thought of taking a second break. He returned to his apartment to see his wife and also to darken his skin. There he learnt about the problem in Ayodhya- the eternal Babri Masjid question. He travelled to Ayodhya in the same status of a beggar. His humiliating experiences in the train to Ayodhya and also at one of the temples there, where, he had to chant Sita Ram thousands of times to get a simple free lunch are heart rendering to read. The rude and hypocritical behaviour of the temple priests and other religious people made him hate Hinduism. He retorts by saying, "I had the impression that they made us pay for the lunch by making us recite Sita Ram. What a Hindu charity!" And also when he says, "the more my metamorphosis

lasts, the more I hate these Brahman-hypocrites. I never knew I could hate other men so much and I now understand that the Blacks in turn could one day become extreme racists.” He found that it is impossible to eradicate caste system in Hinduism through reform, as it is necessary for them as water to the fish. Hence Ambedkar was intelligent in choosing the legal and economic option to bring about equality among men. He also favours the additional 27 percent reservations for the OBCs saying that by the time the government decides who are the OBCs a century would have passed. He also advises the Indian people to concentrate on their economic development rather than spending all their energy on the construction of a temple. He concludes by saying that if only those 2 lakhs people who converged at Ayodhya on 6th December 1992 to build the Ram temple could volunteer themselves for constructing buildings and roads that India needs so badly.

He came back to Benaras and thought of saying goodbye to Ram Munda . But again it was a difficult decision to take as he knew, once he leaves that dress he will never get into it again. In fact he stopped having any hope, feeling or desire for anything. So he was ready to die or rather he wanted to die to get rid of the burden of life as Ram Munda. Suddenly he saw two Japanese tourists who reminded him of his Chinese wife. The thought of her gave him desire to live...He rushed back home to wipe out every trace of his metamorphosis. He dreaded every thought of it- it was too painful and too inhuman.

Marc Boulet on his arrival at his apartment in Paris was surprised to find two clochards (French beggars) sleeping at his doorstep. It was as if to remind him of his own experiences. Before his metamorphosis he would have definitely told them to get lost but the beggar in him made a more compassionate human being out of him and he allowed them to camp there.

Marc Boulet learnt his lessons from his adventure. But we Indians cannot forget the fact that 26 percent of our population is still living under poverty line and another 25 percent are treated as untouchables. A parity in the society can come only with just distribution of our resources. In India the difference between haves and have-nots are immense and the gap can be filled only by giving equal chances to economically weaker sections of the society regardless of their caste, creed, religion or colour. As I have already written in one of the newspapers, this problem can be solved to a great extent if the government hands over our slums to business tycoons who in turn would use part of the colossal tax they pay to the government to develop these slums with the help of NGOs. If we wait for the government to do the job they will never let the slums disappear, as these are their guaranteed vote banks. Let also the rich and the educated people apply the theory of “each one teach one” on these slum dwellers whom they employ as domestic help etc. Let us develop a sense of pride for our nation and work for its all round progress so that when another Marc Boulet comes to India let him not say that this country has become a world of fossils but let him see a really shining India. Let us improve the image of our country by improving our love for our brethren. Let us teach them the basic hygiene so that even the liberal and educated ones like us do not look down upon the Harijans.