

taken from:

V. S. Naipaul. *An Area of Darkness*. New York: MacMillan, 1965. pp. 73-75

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It is the attitude of the foreigner who does not understand the function of the beggar in India and is judging India by the standards of Europe. He is too radical to succeed and of course, in this matter of beggary he has failed.

Shankaracharya Hill, overlooking the Dal Lake, is one of the beauty spots of Srinagar. It has to be climbed with care, for large areas of its lower slopes are used as latrines by Indian tourists. If you surprise a group of three women, companionably defecating, they will giggle: the shame is yours, for exposing yourself to such a scene.

In Madras the bus station near the High Court is one of the more popular latrines. The traveller arrives; to pass the time he raises his dhoti, defecates in the gutter. The bus arrives; he boards it; the woman sweeper cleans up after him. Still in Madras, observe this bespectacled patriarch walking past the University on the Marina. Without warning he raises his dhoti, revealing a backside bare save for what appears to be a rope- like G string; he squats, pisses on the pavement, leisurely rises; the dhoti still raised, he rearranges his G-string, lets the dhoti fall, and continues on his promenade. It is a popular evening walk, this Marina; but no one looks, no face is averted in embarrassment.

In Goa you might think of taking an early morning walk along the balustraded avenue that runs beside the Mandovi River. Six feet below, on the water's edge, and as far as you can see, there is a line, like a wavering tidewrack, of squatters. For the people of Goa, as for those of imperial Rome, defecating is a social activity; they squat close to one another; they chatter. When they are done they advance, trousers still down, backsides bare, into the water, to wash themselves. They climb back on to the avenue, jump on their cycles or get into their cars, and go away. The strand is littered with excrement; amid this excrement fish is being haggled over as it is landed from the boats; and every hundred yards or so there is a blue-and- white enamelled notice in Portuguese threatening punishment for soiling the river. But no one notices.

Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks:- But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover. Muslims, with their tradition of purdah, can at times be secretive. But this is a religious act of self-denial, for it is said that the peasant, Muslim or Hindu, suffers from claustrophobia if he has to use an enclosed latrine. A handsome young Muslim boy, a student at a laughable institute of education in an Uttar Pradesh weaving town, elegantly dressed in the style of Mr Nehru, even down to the buttonhole, had another explanation. Indians were a poetic people, he said. He himself always sought the open because he was a poet, a lover of Nature, which was the matter of his Urdu verses; and nothing was as poetic as squatting on a river bank at dawn.

These squatting figures-to the visitor, after a time, as eternal and emblematic as Rodin's Thinker-are never spoken of; they are never written about; they are not mentioned in novels or stories; they do not appear in feature films or documentaries. This might be regarded as part of a permissible prettifying intention. But the truth is that *Indians do not see these squatters* and might even, with complete sincerity, deny that they exist: a collective blindness arising out of the Indian fear of pollution and the resulting conviction that Indians are the cleanest people in the world. They are required by their religion to take a bath every day. This is central; and they have devised minute rules to protect themselves from every conceivable contamination. There is only one pure way to defecate; in love-making only the left hand is to be used; food is to be taken only with the right. It has all been regulated and purified. To observe the squatters is therefore distorting; it is to fail to see through to the truth. And the ladies at the Lucknow club, after denying that Indians defecate in public, will remind you, their faces creased with distaste, of the habits of Europe-the right hand used for love-making, toilet paper and food, the weekly bath in a tub of water contaminated by the body of the bather, the washing in a wash-basin that has been spat and gargled into-proving by such emotive illustrations not the dirtiness of Europe but the security of India. It is an Indian method of argument, an Indian way of seeing: it is so that squatters and wayside filth begin to disappear. But here is that observer again [Ghandi]

Instead of having graceful hamlets dotting the land, we have dung-heaps. The approach to many villages is not a refreshing experience. Often one would like to shut one's eyes and stuff one's nose; such is the surrounding dirt and offending smell.

The one thing which we can and must learn from the West is the science of municipal sanitation.

By our bad habits we spoil our sacred river banks and furnish excellent breeding grounds for flies... A small spade is the means of salvation from a great nuisance. Leaving night-soil, cleaning the nose, or spitting on the road is a sin against God as well as humanity, and betrays a sad want of consideration for others. The man who does not cover his waste deserves a heavy penalty even if he lives in a forest.