

Video Volunteers

An innovating campaign to fight untouchability

An interview with Stalin K., film maker (*'Lesser Humans'*, *'India Untouched'*)

A fascinating project is currently under way. Spreading it's message all over India, is a campaign against untouchability run by *Video Volunteers*, a unique effort to get a community to document and showcase its own problems to bring them to the notice of the World. The originality lies in the way the campaign is being conducted.

Mari Marcel Thekaekara (May 11, 2012)



People involved in Dalit activism are familiar with Stalin K, film maker and creator of *'Lesser Humans'*, the most brilliant film yet made on the *balmiki* community, about a decade ago. I phoned Stalin to find out more about the new project featuring young marginalized people who were making videos about untouchability practices across India. The project was launched, appropriately, on April 14th 2012, *Ambedkar Jayanti*.

“The idea has been with me for many years”, Stalin said. “Untouchability is pushed under the carpet as tradition. We should focus on issues at a national level. Media interest emerges when someone's hands are chopped off, women are stripped and/or raped, or when people are murdered. But when Dalits are forced to remove their shoes in the presence of dominant castes, not allowed into tea shops, not served, given separate *ram patra* glasses, it's not news. Just tradition and they have to live with it.

Someone has to be answerable. The District Collector, and officials in charge. I would like to see a situation where the Collector is held accountable, He or she is after all the custodian of the Constitution. Our idea is to try and disconnect the everyday untouchability practices from their anthropological and sociological moorings and try to see them for what they are – an offence.”

Stalin continued: “Look at everyday practices again. If you go to a police station, you will find crimes posted, theft, murder, rape. But never untouchability crimes. The police will say, 'there are no complaints'. Why do the police not enforce the law? They absolutely do not consider it a crime. Our society has successfully metamorphosed untouchability from a criminal offence to customary practice and millennia old tradition. The law is never pro-active about this. So we have asked our Video Volunteers to document and record untouchability from all sectors of society, with names and places.

We put these videos up on the internet everyday. The very day we launched the campaign, on April 15th, we received 500 online responses from mainly young people on Facebook and Twitter.”

“*Video Volunteers* is made up of excluded people – Dalits, Muslims, Adivasi and women. All of them come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

These are also people who have faced domestic violence, or religious intolerance. Across 24 states there are now 65 people recording their everyday lives. They work on dowry demands, corruption, forcible eviction, any ongoing issues. Every once in a while, we ask everyone to focus on a particular issue, on one common problem. We believe that we must focus on Article 17", Stalin explained.

Article 17 enshrined in The Constitution of India, on its release in 1949, states that 'untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with the law.' Yet 63 years later, life remains unchanged for the majority of Dalits in India – millions suffer humiliation and degradation for no fault of their own. They remain persecuted merely because they were born into a particular caste and are expected by the dominant castes, to remain in servitude all their lives. A tiny defiance of that is enough for the dominant caste to beat them back into society's ordained position at the bottom of the caste ladder.

Stalin pointed out that *Video Volunteers* was not beating the well trodden path either. "*Video Volunteers* and this campaign against untouchability believe that the onus of ridding India of the stigma of caste, of wiping out casteism from this country, lies not with the Dalit community, but with the dominant castes who have benefitted from the system all these centuries. To expect Dalits to fight this battle, to fight for their rights and against these formidable social structures is unfair and ridiculous. It's interesting to note that people from across caste lines are writing in to protest untouchability. To say this is not okay. They are saying, 'we want to join the campaign'."

However, the campaign is planning to go where angels fear to tread in India. It is asking people to question the very basis of caste, not merely to stop untouchability. It is planning to look at inter-caste marriages and sewerage workers' conditions. Stalin explains: "We want to ensure that everyone in India understands they are responsible. The urban person needs to know that there is a connection between the caste system and the caste structure which they have sanctioned. The fact that sewerage workers work in unhygienic conditions must be highlighted. India is not a poor country anymore. Why do men still die in manholes? We are responsible we cannot remain disconnected."

Solutions of course are not simplistic and Stalin is only too aware of that. "We received footage in which a Dalit man says 'I will not give my daughter in marriage to someone lower than me.' We put that in to show the complexity of the system. Of this society."

But the part which is trickiest is the fact that the campaign questions the entire Indian marriage system. Stalin points out, 'Urban India practices an intra-caste marriage system. To agree to an arranged marriage is sanctioning untouchability because people mostly choose brides or grooms from their own caste. They consider it a matter of tradition but it's really a question of maintaining the purity of the bloodline. The genesis of the marriage system lies in untouchability and notions of purity and impurity. So to agree to an arranged, same caste marriage is necessarily sanctioning untouchability. We are now looking at filing a Public Interest Litigation challenging arranged caste based marriages through newspaper ads as a violation of Article 17.'" This is obviously going to be a really tough battle.

The genesis of the campaign was the work done on issues of drinking water, *balmiki* problems etc, two decades ago. Stalin plans to do an update of '*India Untouched*', his path breaking film on the issue of untouchability. "It's important to keep talking about these issues. We don't have an end time for the campaign. We will ask people to keep going, to continue the

fight. I will begin my calls to the Chairperson of the National Commission for SC/ST. It's important to strengthen the institutions we have created. We have asked the *Video Volunteers* to go to their Police Stations with the videos. Of ordinary daily problems – 'my barber won't give me a shave' and 'I had to use a special Dalit cup for my tea in such and such tea shop' - I anticipate the police will say 'this is not a crime' and then we will produce Article 17."

It's a bold innovative campaign. Surely a few steps forward in this decades old fight for a human existence. We wish them luck in this important and epic battle for dignity and justice.

For more information on Stalin K. and Video Volunteers, visit
<http://stalink.wordpress.com/about/video-volunteers/>