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On Thomas Paine's bones and what happened in Mahad (Maharashtra) in 1927. Thread.

The most reviled man in early 19th century America (because he wrote The Age of Reason) died a pauper in the worst kind of squalor, his body covered in cankers. Denied burial at the Quaker burying ground, he was buried in the orchard of his home in New Rochelle, New York State.

Only six mourners showed up for his funeral. No eulogies were offered. Marguerite Bonneville, a woman he had rescued from France, who became his caretaker in his final years, recalled his interment in this manner:

I, placing myself at the east end of the grave said to my son Benjamin, “stand you there, at the other end, as a witness for a grateful America.” Looking around me and beholding the small group of spectators, I exclaimed as the earth was tumbled into the grave:

“Oh! Mr. Paine! My son stands here as the testimony for the gratitude of America, and I, for France!”

This was the funeral ceremony for Thomas Paine, the moral author of the American Revolution and, by extension, the United States of America. The man who first proposed the appellation United States of America for the thirteen colonies on the east coast of that continent.

The American nation is a written project that has its beginnings in a pamphlet by Paine called Common Sense. In 1776, the year of its release, it sold about 100,000 copies, at a time when the population of the colonies was 2.5 million.

One in forty owned a copy and read it aloud to their compatriots in taverns and public squares.

In the clear vernacular of the people, it offered simple facts and common sensical arguments to summon Americans to throw off the British yoke and declare themselves a republic independent of the crown. It showed them that hereditary succession of monarchy was an absurdity.

It was only after Common Sense that Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington stopped their cooing reconciliatory noises and the revolution began with the American Continental Congress passing the Declaration of

Independence.

And then, when the half trained poorly armed volunteers of General Washington's army were freezing on the banks of the Delaware, awaiting death and defeat at the hands of the British, the galvanic current of Paine's words once again animated them.

"These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman." (the opening pitch of The American Crisis)

But Paine's greatest work was a polemic written in response to Edmund Burke's complete denunciation of the French revolution in his memoir Reflections on the Revolution in France.

Paine's defence of the French Revolution, issued in two parts, became the biggest selling pamphlet in the history of publishing. The Rights of Man outsold Shakespeare in the English speaking world: a quarter of a million copies were sold in its year of release (1791).

In 90,000 words it was the first complete statement of all organic republican principles, including the right of revolution. And it set the minds of the newly literate working classes on fire.

For this, and for advocating that the revolution should cross the English Channel, the book was banned in England and Paine was tried in absentia and convicted of seditious libel against the British crown.

For this, the National Assembly of France made him an honorary citizen. He was elected to be a member of the French Convention and invited to give advice on drafting the French constitution.

To have a hand in two revolutions, as Paine was to say late in life, was living to some purpose. The inspirer of American and French republicanism was not to know the breadth of his own dominion.

Or that of the written word. In 1847, fifty six years after its publication, a smuggled copy of The Rights of Man fell into the hands of a young man of the Mali caste in Pune.

"Man has no property in man. Neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow." The effect of those words, it's demotic rhythms would make Jotirao Phule the first shudra to dare to estimate the consequences of those rights.

He too would become a writer of great explicatory force, write pamphlets in the vernacular for his people, ask them to suffer their reason and determine for themselves whether Brahmin superiority was God-given and eternal and could be transcended.

Phule was essentially subvocalizing Paine when he said that hereditary brahmanism, on its face, was an absurdity.

And so the flame was stolen from Olympus. By a shudra Prometheus. And given to his tribe in defiance of Zeus. From Phule to the Mahar military pensioner from Dapoli, Gopal Walangkar (1840-1900). From Walangkar to Shivram Janba Kamble (1875-1940) to Kisan Bansode(1879-1946).

Each would produce pamphlets as revolutionary batons to be relayed for the deliverance of their people. Each thought they had it “in their power to begin the world over again.”

Their labors reached a point of consummation in a revolution that began in the town of Mahad, Maharashtra in March 1927.

It was at a Conference of the Untouchables (Kolaba district Bahishkrut Parishad) organized to awaken them to their civil rights and prepare them for strife against their ongoing discrimination by upper caste Hindus.

The immediate objective was to enforce the implementation of the Bole resolution (passed in 1923 in the Bombay Legislative Council).

The resolution had recommended that the Untouchable classes be allowed to use all public water sources, wells and dharamshalas built and maintained out of public funds or administered by bodies appointed by the government.

There were 3000 people assembled, mostly Mahars, for the two day conference which began with the presidential address by Dr. Ambedkar.

It ended with a collective march to the local Chavdar water tank to drink from it and give effect to the municipality resolution. ‘…not merely to drink the water of the tank, but to establish that we are also human beings like others.’

On their way back, despite police protection, they were pelted with stones, but did not retaliate. Almost immediately, scriptural shuddhi of the polluted tank was performed by Brahmin priests, followed by the local municipality annulling the Bole resolution by a majority vote.

Ambedkar organized a second conference and a satyagraha where the ferment and aggression was on a much larger scale. For the first time the demand was not to abolish untouchability but to smash the appalling accretions of the Dharmashastras.

In speech after speech what was asked for was the abolition of the chaturvarna system and the reconstruction of Hindu society on the basis of two principles only: single varna and equality.

The idiom of Ambedkar’s historic presidential speech was unmistakably from the assorted staves of Paine’s prose. He compared their own assembly with the revolutionary National Assembly that took place on 5 May 1789 at Versailles in France.

The first resolution passed by the Mahad assembly was a manifesto of birthrights.

All seventeen articles of the manifesto (right down to its syntax) were appropriated from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens by the National Assembly of France – a document that was authored substantially by Thomas Paine.

After this, cremation rites were performed on the Manusmriti.

In 1819, the journalist William Cobbett exhumed Tom Paine’s remains with the intention of reburial in his country of birth, England. That did not happen.

The bones were lost somewhere along the way and legend has it that some of the bones were remade into buttons, others were tossed into the garbage.

There are people on at least three continents that claim they are in possession of various parts of Paine - carpals, mandible, calvarium. Well, some of his osseus matter must have surely found its way to a community of carcass cleaners in Mahad: the Mahars.