He saw India so clearly because he was in part a colonial. He settled finally in India when he was forty-six, after spending twenty years in South Africa. There he had seen an Indian community removed from the setting of India; contrast made for clarity, criticism and discrimination for self-analysis. He emerged a colonial blend of East and West, Hindu and Christian. Nehru is more Indian; he has a romantic feeling for the country and its past; he takes it all to his heart, and the India he writes about cannot easily be recognised. Gandhi never loses the critical, comparing South African eye; he never rhapsodises, except in the vague Indian way, about the glories of ancient India. But it is Gandhi, and not Nehru, who will give as much emphasis to the resolutions passed at a Congress gathering as to the fact that the Tamilian delegates are by themselves because they would have been polluted by the sight of non-Tamilians, and that certain delegates, forgetting that there were no excrement-removers at hand, used the verandah as a latrine.

It is a correct emphasis, for more than a problem of sanitation is involved. It is possible, starting from that casual defecation in a verandah at an important assembly, to analyse the whole diseased society. Sanitation was linked to caste, caste to callousness, inefficiency and a hopelessly divided country, division to weakness, weakness to foreign rule. This is what Gandhi saw, and no one purely of India could have seen it. It needed the straight simple vision of the West; and it is revealing to find, just after his return from South Africa, how Gandhi speaks Christian, Western, simplicities with a new, discovering fervour: ‘Before the Throne of the Almighty we shall be judged, not by what we have eaten nor by whom we have been touched but by whom we have served and how. Inasmuch as we serve a single human being in distress, we shall find favour in the sight of God.’ The New Testament tone is not inappropriate. It is in India, and with Gandhi, that one can begin to see how revolutionary the now familiar Christian ethic must once have been. Hindus might try to find in this ideal of service the ‘selfless action’ of the Gita. But this is only Indian distortion, the eternal Indian attempt to incorporate and nullify. The Gita’s selfless action is a call to self-fulfilment and at the same time a restatement of degree; it is the opposite of the service which Gandhi, the Indian revolutionary, is putting forward as a practicable day-to-day ideal.

The spirit of service, excrement, bread-labour, the dignity of scavenging, and excrement again, Gandhi’s obsessions—even when we remove non-violence, when we set aside all that he sought to make of himself, and concentrate on his analysis of India—seem ill-assorted and sometimes unpleasant. But they hang together; they form a logical whole; they answer the directness of his colonial vision.

Study these four men washing down the steps of this unpalatable Bombay hotel. The first pours water from a bucket, the second scratches the tiles with a twig broom, the third uses a rag to slop the dirty water down the steps into another bucket, which is held by the fourth. After they have passed, the steps are as dirty as before; but now above the blackened skirting tiles the walls are freshly and dirtily splashed. The bathrooms and lavatories are foul; the slimy woodwork has rotted away as a result of this daily drenching; the concrete walls are green and black with slime. You cannot complain that the hotel is dirty. No Indian will agree with you. Four sweepers are in daily attendance, and it is enough in India that the sweepers attend. They are not required to clean. That is a subsidiary part of their function, which is to be sweepers, degraded beings, to go through the motions of degradation. They must stoop when they sweep; cleaning the floor of the smart Delhi café, they will squat and move like crabs between the feet of the customers, careful to touch no one, never looking up, never rising. In Jammu City you will see them collecting filth from the streets with their bare hands. This is the degradation the society requires of them, and to this they willingly submit. They are dirt; they wish to appear as dirt.