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# Deconstructing the Narrative 'Swachh Bharat'

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## Introduction

*Swachh Bharat* or 'clean India' has been one of the major clichés on which the Modi government has overtime gained legitimacy and popularity amongst the masses. Pictures of Narendra Modi and other Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) members sweeping the streets and roads abound in the media. These pictures and media tactics seek to win over the support of the common man, who begin to relate to the metanarrative i.e. '*Janata ki Sarkar*' (Peoples government). Further Narendra Modi's strategies of reaching out to the masses through *Chai pe charcha* and *Mann ki baat* are intertwined with this metanarrative of *Swachh Bharati* and *Shining India*.

However, one needs to critically dissect this narrative of the BJP as it has more implications than meets the eye. The discourse on cleanliness is not new in India as there have been many social reformers, political leaders and religious gurus who have advanced this notion. For instance, Sant Gadge Maharaj of Maharashtra selflessly worked towards cleanliness. Mahatma Gandhi also espoused the cause of cleanliness by associating it with godliness. Dr. B.R Ambedkar exhorted dalit communities to adopt a path to dignity by maintaining good health and cleanliness. He urged dalits to cease animal sacrifice as part of religious rituals and campaigned against vices such as alcoholism.

Various social scientists have argued that since the BJP is a right wing party and has the support of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates such as the Bajrang Dal, Patit Pawan Sanghatna, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) etc, the *Swachh Bharat* abhiyan needs to be examined through a critical lens. This paper attempts to deconstruct the *Swachh Bharat* Abhiyan narrative by examining it through the various facets of the term and the agenda of the BJP and its alliances.

## The Pure and the Impure

In sociology the idea of purity and pollution or the sacred and profane is generally linked to the idea of inclusion and exclusion. For instance as Louis Dumont in his epic work '*Homo Hierarchus*' demonstrates that caste is linked to the purity- pollution binary. The savarna jatis are involved in non-polluting occupations and they practice vegetarianism. The lower castes on the other hand are meat eaters and also consume alcohol. This generalization leads to further universalisation of these binaries. The 'shudras' therefore are deemed to be inferior in terms of their capacity. In the works of M.N Srinivas, it becomes clear how the

process of sanskritisation entails the movement of individuals from the realm of the 'polluting' to one of 'purity'. The individuals gradually over a period of time, sometimes over generations adopt practices of commensality, clothing/dressing and other cultural codes of the upper caste. This over a course of time provides potential for 'passing off' as savarna.

It is important to note that caste as a social marker reveals one's social and cultural practices and preferences in great detail. Food and culinary practices are definitely embedded in caste and kinship practices. For instance Marriott (1968) has examined in great detail about the transactional "matrices" of the numerous local inter-caste food exchanges that occur in North India. He had documented the food ritual based on the principle of purity and pollution- these are five food types- the "raw", "water boiled" (*kacha*) or "ghee fried" (*pakka*) foods, alongside the "food remnants" (particularly the eaten "leftovers" or *jutha*), garbage (*kuda*), and faeces (*gu*). The village which he was observing (Kishangarhi) had thirty-six different caste groups and therefore he adopted multitransactional ranking matrices, rather than the usual binary food exchange scorings (Marriott 1968: 142.-146, 156-158). Dumont (1960) similarly observed that Indian foods and food ways revealed distinct-and indispensable-cultural, linguistic, moral, and material grammars of action patterns, purposes, and meanings (see Khare 1976b: 1-27, 47-80; Khare 1992).

In such a case where food habits are deemed to be an integral part of one's status and position in the caste hierarchy, how does one explain the ban on cow slaughter and ban on consumption of its meat in India? The answer to this could be in the hindutva rhetoric of creating a nation of Hindus. In this sense then, anyone who is a beef consumer, is polluted. Only those practicing vegetarianism, supposedly the Brahmins represent the other end of the spectrum i.e. purity. If one were to stretch one's imagination, the idea of cleansing the nation of 'polluted beings' may even suggest conversion of members of other religions into Hinduism also termed as *Ghar Wapasi*. This term is quite similar to the one that the Arya Samajists use called the 'shuddhi movement'.

The examples of *Ghar Wapasi* from various parts of the country suggest that the right wing in India may be wishing to purge the individuals of their pollution and accommodate them into the 'Hindu' nation. It has also been suggested by scholars that the ban on cow slaughter has economically affected two communities most in India. One being the Muslim community and the other the dalit communities. The Muslims and the dalits are involved in activities related to cow slaughter. Due to this ban, they have had to shut down their abattoirs, leather tanning business, and leather related occupations. Further both these communities because of their economic marginality depend on beef for their staple food that provides the requisite proteins.

It has also been suggested by scholars that the Gujarat carnage affected businesses of the Muslims the most. The reports suggest that members of this community were targeted and eliminated so as to create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. The rhetoric of creating one Hindu nation then is itself anchored in this

large market. Generally women are thought of as unclean as every month they have to undergo the menstrual cycle. The orthodox, right wing party deters women from entering temples or attend any 'auspicious' celebration and cultural event in the name of pollution.

It is also not surprising that this brand of right wing ideology exhorts girls and young women to dress in a 'traditional' manner such that they do not attract undue importance. Moreover the parents and other elders in the family have an additional responsibility i.e. constant surveillance such that the women does not lose her virginity, which then defiles the women and her family. In contrast women from various other communities can be 'defiled' as they deserve it.

There is the violence with which women are reinserted into official kinship relations of which the khap panchayat is the most visible reminder. As student bodies are changing, with higher proportions of hitherto underprivileged castes and groups, including women, seeking higher education, the hyper-visibility of women from all backgrounds taking control their destiny is becoming too much for some sections to bear. Class differences combine in important ways with differences based on region, language and caste.

Our contemporary visual culture is saturated with messages that teach us that sexualised violence and violent male sexuality is normal. Love is unidirectional, declared by men, and succumbed to or accepted by women. They are often loved to death by men who, once spurned, wield the axe, knife or acid bottle. Indian cinema has carefully nurtured this version of loving, a unidirectional flow of feeling from man to woman, whose outcomes are always predictable. Many new entrants to the university system, who come from a very wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds, envy and fear the economic and social independence of women, themselves often from Dalit and OBC communities.

A strict vigilantism is initiated by the state on the reproductive facilities of the women and also on her sexuality. The state hesitates in arresting any one from the vigilante groups if any thing goes wrong. An Indian woman (nari) has to ensure that she protects her chastity from the various prying individuals. To ensure that she is protected, the right wing parties suggest that the brother is an important element. It is during 'Rakshabandan' that the sister acknowledges the brother/s as her saviour. Such an ideology is informed by patriarchy as an idea and practice.

Another agenda of the BJP is to ensure rapid economic growth but only of those who are rich and powerful. The rhetoric 'Make in India' is another fulcrum on which this whole meta-narrative is build upon. The indigenization of knowledge and culture is one of the major agenda's of the present government.

The recent announcement of levying the GST is also not new. The new move is supposedly going to usher in a phase of easy payment of taxes. However in this whole effort of digitalization, it is argued by scholars that it is the marginal and middle class that bear the brunt of the developmental rege.

## Conclusion

This paper set-out to map the various meaning that the word 'Swachh' connotes. The etymology of the term is found in Sanskrit is (swa= self and achh= goodness). This meaning of Swachh encompasses several meanings. It could mean cleanliness from the body to the soul/mind. It could mean end of corrupt practice. It could also have a meaning for the environment. Thus cleaning of 'Ganga Maiyya' is a metaphoric expression of cleansing one's motherland of unwanted and polluted individuals. Following this mode of thought, then it becomes necessary to cleanse oneself of all the impurities. In this narrative then the impure are represented by the lower caste individuals, Muslims and other minorities and also women who are thought to be the guardians and carriers of the family's dignity.

The attempt to invisibilise Mughal history for instance is one way of cleansing the memory of the nation. The ban on cow slaughter is to inform the minorities that this is a Hindu nation-state and therefore they have to respect their practices and culture, but this is not reciprocated but instead, the government wishes to pass a uniform civil code so as to take away any concessions provided to the minorities. Similarly the talk of ceasing the protective discrimination policy is to ensure that the dependency of the scheduled caste increases and thus it may get easier for them to internalize the hegemonic ideology. The Dadri incident is not lost out on the memory of the nation and the government has yet to provide an answer. So it is with the patriarchal nature of the agenda and also the anti-dalit stance in it.

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