

SWEEPING AS A RITUAL IN ANCIENT INDIAN CULTURE

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Sweeping is practice that has been done since ancient times. Sweeping the floors was considered as an act of cleaning. However, it had a broader view. There exist several beliefs about Sweeping as well as about brooms that have been documented in literature and also passed on orally or in practice from generations. These beliefs exist all over the world. Some of these beliefs and customs of Sweeping are also found in Indian literature and culture that have been gleaned from several sources and presented in this paper.

Introduction

The practice of sweeping the ground has been a Traditional custom among all civilizations. It served several purposes of which the chief one was to keep the place clean for doing various chores. Brooms of various shapes and materials have been used by men and women to sweep the grounds. However, there exists a broader view to both the broom as well as Sweeping Custom.

Sweeping Customs and Beliefs in the World

There exist several beliefs regarding Sweeping all over the world. In Japan, the practice of carefully sweeping out rooms in which an unwelcome guest has been after the visitor has left the house for the purpose of keeping him from repeating his visit is based on the idea of sweeping out all influences belonging to him which he has left in house so that nothing will be there to tend to draw him back there again¹. In East Prussia and Silesia, sweeping or throwing out the sweepings after sunset is forbidden lest one expel good fortune.

In several parts of Europe, old Paths not used for a long time were swept to rid them of any Ghost or Hunting spirits. The *Aymara Indians* sweep the Plaza in front of a church before the Saint's statue so as to cleanse the ground of harmful influences. Experts think that the *Nazca lines of Peru* were also ritually swept long ago just as the *Kogi Indians* of Columbia do to this day². Likewise the ancient people considered the broom as a means for supernatural cleansings. In some parts of England, Husbands hanged the broom from the window when their wives were away for a few days. In Thuringia, Saxon and Switzerland, there is an association of burning of a broom with subsequent Arrival of visitors. Brooms are also used to protect Infants and women in the child bed as in parts of Bavaria, Russia and Hungary³. There are several taboos practiced by various cultures that forbid stepping

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over or crossing a broom. Stepping over a broom by a bridal pair is found to be in practice in parts of Central Europe to ward off evil influences. Likewise, Striking of children, men or animals being whipped with a broom are taboos as the spirits clinging to it deteriorates their growth.

Sweeping in Vedic and Puranic Texts

Ancient Indian texts also speak widely about sweeping and its associated beliefs. Sanskrit literature terms the broomstick as "*Maarjani Danda*". The small brooms carried by Buddhist and Jain ascetics is called "*Staupika*". Most of the temple consecration ceremonies have cleansing rituals with a broom. *Puranic* literature also upholds such sweeping practices. The *Skandha Purana* states that one who sweeps the courtyard of a Shiva temple attains *Shivaloka* (the abode of Lord Shiva)⁴. The *Garuda Purana* (*Acharya Kanda*, I.114.43) states that dust from a broom is unholy and conducive of great sin⁵. Ritualistic Sweeping by the king is followed as a custom to mark the starting of the Car festival (*Ratha Yatra*) of Lord *Jagannath at Puri, Orissa*. Sweeping the house in the morning was a traditional practice since ancient times.

Sweeping Customs and Beliefs in Indian Culture and Folklore

In Ancient Indian culture and literature also one finds several sweeping customs and associated beliefs. In several parts of India, the Broomstick is regarded as an effective remedy against evil eye and hung in front of lying chamber. A small chip of the broom is attached to the neck of baby if it has to be carried outside the house from some distance. In case of rheumatic afflictions, it is held with the head down and water is allowed to fall on inflammation⁶. The process is repeated on alternate days to cure pain. Forest people worship the broom as a useful household article and offer sacrifice to it.

Even goats when sick are lightly brushed with a broom at Sunset on Tuesday or Saturdays to cure them. A possessed person is ordered by exorcist to carry the Broom in his mouth as a test that the spirit has yielded to his spells.

There exists another belief that if a person accidentally touches a broom, a little chip is torn and expectoration is made on it from the mouth. It is then made to describe Two and a half circles overhead of the person who touches it, thrown on the Ground and stamped upon by him to inflict humiliation on it that it may not brush him out of the house.

The Bodo tribes of India believe that in month of *Ashadh*, the Mother Earth Menstruates. As this period signifies defilement, on the 7th day women throw away their old broomsticks and replace them by new ones⁷.

Muria tribes of Central India regard brooms as devices to sweep away Ghosts and spirits. Sticks or grass from broom are used in Magic or Divination. Also, throughout the year ceremonies called '*Halbi bohorani*' are performed to purify

villages of disease and evil. Old brooms are carried to village boundary. The *Murias* also have riddles on brooms such as '*Lick quickly and fall down*'. Similarly oaths are taken by grass in a broom and also used to find out about illness and where the cattle have strayed⁸.

Regarding the invention of a broom, the *Dhobas* of Mandla district have an interesting myth on Magic brooms⁹.

Hindus generally regard the broom to be sacred and representative of Goddess *Lakshmi* who bestows prosperity. It is believed that one if one sweeps the house daily, then there would be no dearth of wealth in his home. During *Diwali* festival, there exists a custom of beating a sieve and house broom in every corner of house exclaiming 'God abide and poverty depart!'. The ancient texts forbid the custom of sweeping a place at the Twilight intervals like Sunrise or after Sunset. Likewise, it was taboo to stamp on the broom. In some parts there exists a belief that if someone sweeps the feet with a broom, one will have to grab the broom and spit on it else there will be bad luck. In West Bengal, there exist beliefs that if Two brooms are kept at one place together, it leads to quarrel in the place. Local beliefs in several parts of the Country forbid Sweeping of the Floor on Tuesday and Fridays. Also it is taboo to carry a broom while on the move.

Among the *Santals*, there exists a means of divination and detection of disease by means of a broom made of *Sirom* [*Andropogon muricatus*] grass by which a square or circle *Yantra* is drawn with a twig placed in each cell. He takes out a twig, touches it with a *mantra* or mentioning disease on Forehead and destroys the figures drawn. If the hand trembles, it is a disease just named¹⁰. In parts of Himachal Pradesh, brooms are tied on an auspicious day and first Wedded ritualistically to a tree and prayed to before being used for sweeping the house¹¹. There exists beliefs that brooms are to be kept in a place where no one can see. In a rare ritual, women offer brooms to the presiding deity of *Kalikulangara Devi* temple near *Ernakulam* district, Kerala in order to seek blessings to have long and thick hair maintaining its beauty¹². A similar custom of offering brooms is practiced in the *Pataleshwar Bholenath* temple in Moradabad as devotees believe this will cleanse their sins.

Conclusions

The practice of sweeping the ground has been immemorial and served to keep the place clean for doing various chores. Brooms of various shapes and materials have been used by men and women to sweep the grounds. Today although the practice of sweeping manually seems to be dying out with younger generations feeling that it was a matter of dignity, one must realize that sweeping the ground has a greater ritualistic view. Sweeping is a kind of worship to Mother Earth on which we live. In order that all good ceremonies are performed and evils spirits that haunt a particular place are driven, traditions speak of Sweeping and cleaning the place. Such practices are carried up to this day by millions of people all over the world

that it would be necessary to have a scientific view of Sweeping and its benefits. Also research into the vast Literature and Folk beliefs in Indian tribal cultures may give us a broader picture of Sweeping.

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