

Seminar Report

CLEANLINESS: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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A one day seminar titled “Cleanliness: An Anthropological Perspective” was held in Department of Anthropology on January 16, 2015 to discuss the theoretical trajectories to ‘dirt’ and ‘cleanliness’ in anthropology and further road ahead in an applied perspective, especially in Indian context.

The seminar anchored by R. P. Mitra was chaired by D. K. Bhattacharya and graced by other distinguished veterans of anthropology like I. S. Marwah, Raghbir Singh and S. Nath. Other participants and audience consisted of Department faculty, research scholars and postgraduate students from across social science disciplines.

In his opening address, the Head of the Department, V. K. Srivastava, introduced the theme of the seminar and shared with the session how it had long been due in the seminar series of the Department, following the launch of *Swacch Bharat Abhiyan* by Government of India last year. He acknowledged the lack of scholarly work in the field of cleanliness by anthropologists in Indian context and expressed hope to chalk out a plan of action through a discussion of theoretical strands given by the likes of Mary Douglas on ‘purity and pollution’ and ‘meaning of dirt’ through this brainstorming session. The discipline of anthropology, according to him, can contribute immensely to a more people-oriented and sustainable approach towards the issue of cleanliness giving the various sub-fields within anthropology a chance to effectively address the notions and practices around dirt and cleanliness in society across time and space.

D. K. Bhattacharya shared his reflections on the issue, taking a skeptical stance towards the *swachhta abhiyan*, while agreeing on the importance of such a mission towards cleaner India. He opined that without a gradual yet sustained change in the cultural cognition of Indians, mere governmental slogans would not yield much result. He based his arguments on his experience as an anthropologist in various rural and tribal areas and found the spaces to be extremely clean, even to the extent of being sacred in

certain communities. Also, Indians practice immense personal hygiene and ritual purity is highly valued. But while such a personal cleanliness abounds, the public spaces are marred with dirt and squalor. Through various experiences from around the country, he put forth a grim picture of absence of public hygiene and toilet etiquettes based on cultural factors. He reasoned that the twin issues of alienating people from a collective ownership of public spaces in the name of state and resource scarcity like water, etc., in hinterlands need to be tackled first in order to bring a cognitive change and provide an effective sanitation.

I. S. Marwah shared anecdotes from his field visits during his doctoral term and revisit to the same place decades later and discussed how 'cleanliness' as a concept has changed drastically even in rural locales as modernist architecture and lifestyle seeps in. He pondered over Gandhi's ideal of 'ritual purity' through instances mentioned in his book *My Experiments with Truth* and cited it ironical to see Indian engaging in 'public filth' while having high standards of 'personal hygiene'. He linked such a behaviour with the idea of 'ritual pollution' where people, especially Hindus and Hindu-influenced tribes, find it below their dignity to clean dirt and rather ascribe it to be a work meant for 'scavenging communities' which is very unfortunate. He contrasted such a situation with that found in many non-Hinduised tribes like Ao Nagas who have age-grades to look after cleanliness of public spaces that effectively maintains cleanliness and also avoid harmful categorizing of certain communities as ritually polluted or unclean. He also called in for a stricter responsibility on the municipalities in cities to maintain cleanliness of public spaces.

Subhadra Channa called for a cognitive understanding of the concept of cleanliness as it is an aspect of culture which is made up of cognitive categories. This cognition, manifested through its language sheds important light on understanding the subtle nuances. She discussed the western/ modern terms of cleanliness, purity, hygiene and aesthetics, which form the basis for cleanliness drive in the country today. But semiotic content of only cleanliness translated as *swachhta* and purity (ritual purity in Indian context) as *shudhta* are found in Hindi which belong to environmental and personal domains. Hygiene is a concept that found no translation in Indian context. As such people's understanding of cleanliness has to be understood in terms of *swacch* and *shudh*. Giving the example of river Ganga, she discussed work on 'cleanliness of Ganga' by a colleague in which she came across the idea of divine cleanliness of Ganga held among people. So, even if they discard wastes in Ganga, the river isn't deemed polluted as it is *shudh* by divine grace. Hence, the idea of *swachhta* is always tied up under overarching idea of *shudhta*.

She cited such a nexus to be the reason of failure of many modern sanitation programs in India, where people would simply not use toilets built in their houses compounds due to fear of 'ritual pollution' of kitchen located in

the same compound. She also discussed the absence of ideas of citizenship as in west and dichotomy of 'public and private' in Indian worldview where anything beyond 'personal ritual purity' was left historically to 'untouchable/polluted' castes for cleaning and the absence of the idea of 'citizen' resulted in lack of civic societies for this very matter. Thus, in her view, the conceptual issues underlying the cognition of people need to be understood and steps be taken in accordance for an effective 'cleanliness' movement.

P. C. Joshi talked about the history of cleanliness around the world and discussed how ideas about cleanliness have changed from ancient times to medieval and post-germ theory in modern Europe, thereby influencing the ideas currently taken as standard in sanitation and hygiene. This, he contrasted with ideas still in practice in rural parts of India where modernity hasn't had much influence till now. Sharing an example from his field, he discussed how a newlywed couple would go to worship at two places deemed sacred in local worldview — the village well and the garbage dump. Hence, plurality of the meaning of dirt needs to be understood.

Commenting on the association of ideas of ritual inferiority and pollution with cleaning of dirt among Indians as the biggest impediment to cleanliness and hygiene in India, he asserted for the need to adopt Gandhi's concept of *swaraj*/self-reliance as hierarchy, feudalism and patriarchy are biggest deterrents towards a clean India. Commenting on the difference between Indian and western notions of cleanliness of public spaces he vouched for a more 'social' approach, where people are made to comply through community participation and belonging model than 'civic' where people pass off with their ill-etiquettes due to an element of anonymity.

He also discussed with the audience a long four-year study conducted by several researchers from Department of Anthropology in 120 locations in Delhi and 35 locations outside Delhi to observe civic behaviour among people like littering, spitting, encroachment, social etiquettes and observation of traffic rules. The Department plans to revisit the study sites in order to assess change and continuity with time. Based on his study reports he emphasized a multi-prong approach, infrastructure creation like installations of dustbins, installations of urinals, mechanization of sanitation and abolishment of manual scavenging, waste recycling, cognitive change through cultural sensitization, etc.

V. R. Rao discussed the role of environmental engineering in creating better solutions in the domain of cleanliness in India. This, he asserted is important as environment stands at the confluence of physical cleanliness or *swacchta* and ritual purity or *shudhta*. He made a cause for anthropologists trying to further micro-understanding on this issue as empiricism has always been our strength. Drawing from his experience as Director of Anthropological Survey of India, he proposed following 'intervention as a strategy' for applied

action in the field of sanitation and hygiene in India. While discussing historically ingrained movements on cleanliness in India, like the *Dhamma movement* and Dr. Ambedkar preaching physical cleanliness under neo-Buddhism, he called for a need to link social movements with environmental engineering for maximizing sustainability. Giving the corollary of his strategy to promote hygienic conditions in his laboratory, he also advocated stricter restrictions and regulations governing cleanliness.

K. N. Saraswathy raised the issue of laboratory hygiene and safety in Department of Anthropology and urged the University to be more proactive in matters related to safe disposal of bio-hazard. Through her personal experiences in South and North India, she discussed that cleanliness is a population specific concept that varies widely across geographies and culturally framed lifestyles. She talked of cultural aspects like menstrual taboos still associated with cleanliness and purity in rural India but agrees that western standards of hygiene and cleanliness are largely adhered to in urban locations. She agreed to Prime Minister's address in recently concluded 102nd Indian Science Congress on the need to develop locally suited innovations for a just action.

Avitoli Zhimo raised a question of whether one can conveniently label 'cleanliness' as inherent to a culture or is it something that falls outside it. She discussed the concept of cleanliness before and after the advent of Christianity as religion among Sumi Nagas in Nagaland in which she highlighted how the 'modern' notions of personal hygiene were preached by Christian missionaries. The Naga lifestyle was very different from western standards as pigs, which are considered as inherent part of life among Nagas, used to live under the same roof as humans. Concept of 'ritual purity' as seen in Hindus is also lacking in Nagas. One of the rituals where such a 'ritual pollution' is observed is during the construction of dwellings when men are forbidden from sexual contact or mingling with women for a certain period.

Mitashree Srivastava discussed her views on different perspectives on cleanliness. For her, cleanliness can be approached through different understandings. The metaphorical understanding of cleanliness would highlight the association of dirt with people in how a person handling garbage is termed *kachrewala/kachrewali* and given a ranking low in imagined hierarchy. Also, one could try to delineate the boundary between clean and dirty and how it is mediated in popular understanding. Highlighting instances from her fieldwork in Bodh Gaya, she discussed how Buddhism enculturates people into cleanliness through practicing acts of kindness, which can be modeled out on a large scale in other religions to promote cleanliness right from childhood.

S. M. Patnaik put to table the binary that comes with the use of term 'clean' and whether we risk implying that something is 'unclean' and thus,

attribute a cultural meaning to it through talking about cleanliness. He offered a more culturally neutral term that could be instead employed to discuss the matter at hand as 'sanitation'. Talking further on binaries, he quoted that Indian sense of public cleanliness is contrary to Hindu beliefs of external embodiment of entire cosmos and needs to be explored. Remembering his fieldwork done in Bastar in 2006, he narrated how toilets were welcomed in houses but rejected after a certain time of usage as cleaning toilets was unacceptable to Rajput groups at the risk of ritual pollution. Later, when toilets were made compulsory by government under Indira Awas Yojana, the whole exercise proved to be a big burden on women as they had to fetch water, now additionally for toilets, from far off. Thus, he argued that government programs should promote a balance between cultural ways to deal with sanitation and natural ecosystems rather than pushing aggressively an imported concept of 'cleanliness'. Also, he warned of a possible future mix between a focus on *swacchta* and *shudhta* as religion and market make for a lethal combination.

M. Kennedy Singh called in for a more pronounced personal involvement in any cleanliness initiative. He argued that one cannot jump upon the notion of 'cleanliness' in an unequivocal manner and cultural, psychological and social barriers faced by people must be taken care of before arriving at any such notion. He discussed, from his fieldwork among Badhayus who are mostly indentured laborers, that cleanliness can be understood at the level of individual, family and community and individual is the key to success of such a cleanliness movement.

Various research scholars also shared their findings on the issue of dirt, cleanliness and sanitation from across India.

Nilisha Vashist, from her research in Delhi and Rajasthan, called for deconstruction of category of dirt to understand the underlying processes of it being 'out of place' in Indian ethos, employing Mary Douglas' notion of 'purity and pollution'. She discussed through narratives, how people littering in public places operate under a sense of cleanliness by eliminating the waste out of their bodies/personal space, be it body, bags, clothes or seats onto something external like their surroundings or 'out of window' which is not their embodied realm. Thus, 'place not to be dirtied' can be understood to be 'personal' which is in contrast to western and currently propagated notion of 'place not to be dirtied' as 'public'. Building upon structural aspects of cleanliness from previous speakers, she also discussed how a change in society from caste role constellation to nation state and transition from rural to urban has outmoded the earlier systems of maintaining cleanliness. Added to this systemic change is addition of newer materials that lend an ambiguity in being assigned along the hierarchy of purity, for example, plastic-products and waste. These subtle yet significant nuances need to be understood and suitably incorporated for a successful cleanliness drive.

Rachna A. Saksena discussed the concept of cleanliness as understood by those entrusted with the very act and responsibility of maintaining, that is, the *safai karamcharis*. Drawing data from her ongoing research at four different sites, she highlighted the process and practice of cleanliness through narratives, from the eyes of individuals and institutions like municipalities, which engage with dirt as a part of their profession. Not only she discussed the generation of sites which are to be cleaned when they are considered as dirty and cleanliness as a concept and difference between cleaning private and public spaces but also the associated aspects of generation of a cultural meaning associated with dirt that impinges on inferiority within a cosmological hierarchy.

Chitra Kadam discussed the problems and prospects of sanitation in remote locales of water-scarce regions. She highlighted, in particular, the burden of sanitation as faced by women, who suffer most at the hands of insufficient sanitation as well as ecological constraints of water and other resources. She discussed possible remedies to be effective and ingenious use of environmentally engineered models and technological innovations to provide cost effective and acceptable sanitation to all.

R. P. Mitra summarized the session by highlighting the role of anthropology which can deconstruct the conceptual issues at hand under 'cleanliness' in Indian context and build upon the strengths of its subfields as well as allied sciences to provide for more effective plan of action through innovative technologies and cultural cognitive modeling.

In his closing remark, the Head of the Department summarized the outcome of seminar in four broad strands that emerged and may possibly be further explored on later occasions. First, the conceptual issue underlying the notion of dirt and cleanliness and its renderings in Indian context raise several interesting questions for research and policy framework. In this context, he also discussed his departure from Mary Douglas' idea of an absence of absolute dirt. Second, the idea of cultural relativism that needs to be adhered to while dealing with cleanliness in different communities and standards acceptable to each, which he highlighted with the case of Jain monks. Third, semiotic understanding of 'cleanliness' which he opines should be understood through its own terms and not in comparison to other language. Commenting on the assertion of absence of equivalent term for hygiene in Hindi, he expressed that even though the specific word might be lacking, some ideas would still be present. Fourth, he put his case forward for a cautious approach while uncritically importing western notions of cleanliness owing to its own paradoxes, for example, where picking one's nose in public is poor etiquette while blowing it is not!

He expressed his happiness over the vibrant discussion over various dimensions of cleanliness in the seminar and chalked out a further plan of

action which could include researches by scholars in understanding qualitatively and quantitatively the concept of beauty and aesthetics from a historical perspective, a comparison of understanding of cleanliness in older versus recent monographs of various communities, link of cleanliness to sanitation where toilets are preferred and inclusive spaces in modern lifestyle and so on.

As a vote of thanks, he expressed his deep gratitude to the University of Delhi for funding the seminar and hence, opening up the dialogue within social sciences to discuss culturally feasible and conceptually salient issues on cleanliness.