

# Silencing Caste, Sanitising Oppression

## Understanding Swachh Bharat Abhiyan

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The Hindu notions of purity and pollution, inextricably linked with the caste system and the practice of untouchability, underlie the unsanitary practices in Indian society. These beliefs perpetuate the oppression of the “polluted castes,” who are forced to undertake manual scavenging, unclog manholes and clean other people’s filth. The availability of cheap Dalit labour to do these dehumanising jobs can be cited as one of the reasons why development of toilet facilities and a modern garbage and sewage management system have been neglected so far. As long as the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan attempts to delink the relationship between caste and sanitation, its lofty goal of cleaning India will remain unachievable.

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Interrogating *swachhata* (cleanliness) along the fractures of caste, gender, labour, public health, and the organisation of city life/death in the context of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Campaign), a campaign launched by the Narendra Modi government in 2014, becomes important today. Looking back, one feels rather surprised that the euphoria generated around this campaign by the propaganda machinery of the government, duly aided by the media, had even overwhelmed a section of its long-time critics, and they were all praise for the scheme’s “novelty” and “innovativeness.” Now that the euphoria has died down, photo sessions are over, and the celebrities who were vying with each other to hold the broom before the camera have migrated to other more interesting “causes,” one can look at the whole initiative in a much more objective manner.

When the campaign was launched, Sanjay, a ragpicker, who lives in Mehrauli with his parents, exclaimed while watching ministers, bureaucrats and others holding *jhadoos* (brooms) on the television screen, “These are the same people from whose houses we pick up garbage every day. This is part of our life. We don’t really understand why they are making such a big deal about it” (Joshi 2014). Sanjay is part of a vast population of ragpickers in Delhi, who are largely invisible but play a major role in the garbage management of the city. We know that without them the city can easily come to a halt. The government, however, is in complete denial of their presence even though it is ready to reap the benefits of their hard work. The complete marginalisation of the likes of Sanjays in the Clean India Campaign was

rather symptomatic of the many other “silences” and “erasures” which had accompanied its launching.

The launch of this top-down initiative had witnessed “erasure/cleaning” of a totally different kind, where even the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi was “reduced” to cleanliness, obliterating his lifelong struggle against colonialism and communalism of every kind and for an inclusive polity. It was a very oblique way of appropriating his image by the Sangh Parivar, who had never felt comfortable with his politics, and yet wanted him as an icon, albeit in a sanitised form.

In fact, the thrust of the campaign appeared to project a *samras* (harmonious) picture of our society, where cleanliness or the lack of it was connected with our *kartavya* (duty) towards *Bharat Mata* (Mother India). The oath administered by the Prime Minister to everyone who joined this campaign was: “*Ab hamara kartavya hain ki gandagi ko dhoor karke Bharat Mata ki sewa karein*” (Now, it is our duty to serve Mother India by removing the dirt). Simple slogans definitely look attractive or catchy, but there is always a possibility that they fail to capture the larger complex reality and perpetuate historical asymmetries, injustices and varied forms of casteism.

### ‘In Search of Dignity and Justice’

Before we start, perhaps it would be opportune to take a look at the lives of those engaged in cleaning. A small photo essay, a visual narrative, titled “In Search of Dignity and Justice” by the well-known photojournalist Sudharak Olwe seems to be an eye-opener (2013). He has focused his lens on conservancy workers of Mumbai. According to this narrative, there are around 30,000 conservancy workers/sweepers who work for Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation. He writes:

All of them are Dalits, belonging to the lowest rung of the caste system. They have little or no education. Without exception, all of them despise their work. They are completely ignored or looked down upon with disgust by the rest of the society. They have to work in the midst of filth, with no protective gear not even access to water to wash of the slime.

Most of them are alcoholics<sup>1</sup> and live in poverty, in dismal housing...The workers abuse their wives and children. And when the husbands die, the despised job passes to the widows. The despair continues (Olwe 2013).

He further adds “I want the citizens to see the workers and to acknowledge their presence and contribution.” He states that the aim of his photography “is to give a call to action, to urge fellow human beings through my pictures to change the picture” (Olwe 2013).

The pictures presented here—life stories of the conservancy workers and the apathy of the rest of the society towards their work—are definitely not soothing to the eyes. But one has to remain patient, and not merely look at the pictures but look beyond them, reminding ourselves of the stark fact that millions of people in this country—who are equal citizens of the republic—are condemned to live a subhuman life in the second decade of the 21st century, so that the rest of the society looks “clean.” Also, it is high time that we acknowledge the “contribution they make for our health and survival, at the cost of their own health and survival” (Olwe 2013).

### City Sewers or Death Traps?

The brief visual narrative by Sudharak Olwe reminded me of my own blood-curdling experience when we decided to do something about deaths in sewers. In 2004, numerous such deaths were reported in various newspapers, and we felt perturbed about it. First we collated a report—a very rudimentary one to be frank—based on an initial survey to know the working conditions of the sewer workers. We also met a few families who had lost their young sons in sewers, talked to officials of the Safai Karmachari Commission and also interacted with activists who were in the know of things. And as a second step, we decided to launch a small campaign to communicate to the “civil society” that in Delhi alone a 100 workers were sacrificed at the altar of sewer every year and that this silent genocide of workers was a blot on democracy and should not be allowed to continue. To send our message across, we distributed handbills, staged a street play and also held street corner meetings. This initiative

culminated in a big public meeting at the Constitution Club, New Delhi.

As a part of the campaign, we distributed a handbill titled “City Sewers or Death Traps?” The pamphlet contained details of the deaths of two workers—Ala and Umesh—on 12 June 2004, while they were cleaning the sewer at Samaypur Badli, a locality in Delhi, and then moved on to the “powers that be who never appear to be unduly disturbed with such deaths.” It also questioned the media, which is “always on the prowl for sensational news” but remained silent over such deaths. It also mentioned why none of the *safai karmacharis* (sanitation workers) were even provided elementary tools such as rope, box, oxygen cylinder, mask, etc, at the time of descending into the gutters. It ended with a few questions about sewer workers not getting adequate compensation in case of death or injury and why nobody was prosecuted for such deaths.

Believe me, when I was rereading the handbill, I felt that we were really naive as far as the issue was concerned. Naive about the gravity of the situation as it exists and also about the remedies which were and still are offered to ameliorate it.

Incidentally, just three years after our brief intervention in 2007, Sriyavan Anand did a story in *Tehelka* titled “Life Inside a Black Hole,” where he discussed how “Beneath the glitter of India are dark alleys in which are trapped poisonous gases and millions of Dalits who do our dirty job in return for disease and untouchability.” Few facts in the report were mind-numbing to say the least. According to Anand,

At least 22,327 Dalits of a sub-community die doing sanitation work every year. Safai Kamgar Vikas Sangh, a body representing sanitation workers of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), sought data under the Right to Information Act in 2006, and found that 288 workers had died in 2004–05, 316 in 2003–04, and 320 in 2002–03, in just 14 of the 24 wards of the BMC. About 25 deaths every month. These figures do not include civic hospital workers, gutter cleaners or sanitation workers on contract. Compare this with the 5,100 soldiers—army, police, paramilitaries—who have died between 1990 and 2007 combating militancy in Jammu and Kashmir (2007).

It also underlined the fact that most of the workers who work in sewers die before retirement. The average lifespan of a manhole worker is about 45 years. If a worker does not die inside a manhole but due to illnesses contracted while doing the job, then there is no monetary compensation. For undertaking the hazardous job, the worker gets a paltry “risk allowance,” which for example, is Rs 50 in Delhi. In developed countries, manhole workers are provided with proper safety equipment before they descend into the gutter. According to the *Tehelka* report,

manhole workers there are protected in bunny suits to avoid contact with contaminated water and sport a respiratory apparatus; the sewers are well-lit, mechanically aerated with huge fans and therefore are not so oxygen deficient. In Hong Kong, a sewer worker, after adequate training, needs at least 15 licences and permits to enter a manhole (Anand 2007).

In contrast, in India

the manhole worker wears nothing more than a loincloth or half-pants. In Delhi, since the directives of the National Human Rights Commission in October 2002, the majority of the DJB’s permanent workers wear a ‘safety belt’. It’s a joke. This belt, connecting the worker through thick ropes to men standing outside, offers no protection from the gases and the sharp objects that assault the worker. At best, it helps haul them out when they faint or die (Anand 2007).

The report emphasised that it is not the lack of funds or technology which poses a problem. If technology could be used to launch satellites, then why can it not be used for managing garbage and sewage?

India’s urban planners, designers and technologists have never felt the need to conceive a human-friendly system of managing garbage and sewage. Instead, they rely on an unending source of disposable, cheap, Dalit labour (Anand 2007).

Perhaps the hiatus which separates the “almost invisible sewer worker,” mostly belonging to the Dalit caste, and the articulate sections of our society and their complete indifference to the pain and agony the manhole workers face, is best reflected in a Radio Mirchi television commercial which was aired a few years ago (Anand 2007). The said advertisement was on air for close to two years, where a man inside the manhole

was heard singing the song *Yeh suhana mausam, yeh khula aasmaan, kho gaye hum yahaan, haye, kho gaye hum yahaan...* (This lovely weather, these wide open skies, we are lost in the bliss, oh, we are lost here) (Anand 2007).

Viewers could see a paan-chewing man in a safari suit wondering

what keeps the man down in the manhole so happy that he should sing. Zooming in on the trousers and footwear left beside the manhole cover, the tagline said: “*Mirchi Sunnewaale... Always Khush*”. Conceived by Praseon Joshi of Mc-Cann Erickson, the ad went on without a murmur of protest from viewers or civil rights groups (Anand 2007).

### Shocking Indifference

Can we ask ourselves why nobody protested or even raised questions about this advertisement? Would similar stigmatisation of a race or community in one of the advanced countries generate a similar reaction? In a country where around 22,000-plus people die every year—one can debate the figures—in the process of unclogging our sewers and many more die before they reach the age of retirement, we have no qualms in “imagining” that someone working in a sewer is “enjoying” his work.

The only “explanation” possible for this state of affairs is that caste and related discriminations have become so common and ingrained in our psyche that nobody finds anything abominable. Perhaps this unique system of hierarchy—legitimised by the wider society and sanctified by religion—which has condemned a section of its own people to the “profession” of cleaning, sweeping and scavenging, has become a part of our thinking. It is a reflection of the deeper malaise afflicting the country. India, which yearns to become a “economic superpower” in the 21st century, has half of its population defecating in the open and lakhs of people still engaged in the “profession” of shit collection. In fact, we have designated communities who have been “forced” into this dehumanising profession since centuries.

These designated communities go by many names in various parts of the country. As Gita Ramaswamy describes in her book *India Stinking*, these communities are known as Bhangi, Valmiki,

Methar, Chuhra in Delhi, Dhanuk in Uttar Pradesh, Han and Hadi in Bengal; Mehtar and Bhangi in Assam; Methar in Hyderabad; Paki in coastal Andhra; Thotti in Tamil Nadu; Mira, Lalbegi, Chuhra and Balashahi in Punjab (2005: 3).

Names may be different, but they share the same fate: they belong to the bottom of the Hindu social hierarchy and are untouchables. Under the caste hierarchy, castes that consider themselves superior do enjoy a wider range of choice of occupations. But the erstwhile untouchables, today’s Dalits, have the least desirable occupations—removal of human excreta, cleaning, sweeping, leatherwork, skinning of dead animals, removal of human and cattle corpses, rearing of pigs, etc. And one witnesses this social hierarchy existing within other religious communities in the country as well.

Few years back, three short films on the practice of manual scavenging by a young director P Amudhan (2005) from Southern India had made waves. One of these films titled *Vande Mataram—A Shit Version* had A R Rahman’s popular song “Vande Mataram” playing in the background, while a women manual scavenger from Madurai went about performing her task.<sup>2</sup> This music video was a conscious attempt to question the pseudo-patriotism of the people and a society which allows such heinous practices like scavenging on casteist lines. This music video had caused quite a furore, and the then Tamil Nadu government had to act against the local collector of the district where the film was made, supposedly for turning a blind eye towards this inhuman practice.

Everybody knew that it was just an eyewash. The practice is widespread all over India. According to official figures, India happens to be the number one country as far as open defecation is concerned, where more than 60 crore people have no sanitation facilities at home, and they either go out in the fields or use dry latrines to relieve themselves. According to official figures, more than 6.76 lakh people<sup>3</sup>—95% of them women—who are engaged in what is known as manual scavenging, that is, “lifting and removal of human excreta manually.”<sup>4</sup>

Bezwada Wilson, who is working for the liberation of manual scavengers from their “profession” under the banner of Safai Karmachari Andolan for many years, writes in a foreword to the book *India Stinking*

How can one feel proud of cleaning the worm filled, stench producing shits of millions every day? Instinctively closing our nostrils, filling our chests with what fresh air we can muster before entering these toilets, we safai karmacharis suffer from the worst kinds of respiratory and skin infections. ..many would tell us how at the age of eight or eleven they were introduced to this work; how for many days they could not bring food to their lips; how the stench of shit was constantly in their nostrils; how they were constantly spitting out the shame and the indignity (Ramaswamy 2005: viii).

### Government Indifference

Not that there have not been attempts by the government to eradicate this practice, but these have been half-hearted and have exhibited its indifference. For example, the Government of India promulgated the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act in 1993, but it took four years to notify it in the Gazette of India (1997). No state bothered to promulgate the act till 2000. And one notes that within 20 years of its existence, not a single government official has been convicted for allowing this practice to continue. In fact, it was observed that the main violators of the law were government authorities themselves. The Indian Railways continued to resist its implementation under the specious plea that the cost factor has to be taken into consideration if the practice has to be eliminated.

As if to acknowledge the failure of this act, the government passed a new legislation, the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 or the MS Act, 2013 in September 2013 and issued a government notification for the same. The legislation views the provision of protective gear to the workers and observance of safety precautions as an alternative to mechanisation (*Hindu* 2013). According to the act, those using protective gear and devices as may be notified by the central government would not come

under the definition of a “manual scavenger.” This is nothing but an escape clause for local and railway authorities to continue to deploy workers for manual scavenging (Hindu 2013).

### Caste and Neglect of Sanitation

Interestingly, people in other South Asian countries have better access to sanitation facilities. Figures from the *United Nations Human Development Report 2001*, as cited by Ramaswamy (2005) in her book, are quite revealing in this regard (Table 1).

**Table 1: Access to Sanitation**

HDI Rank	Country	Population with Sustainable Access to Improved Sanitation (%)	
		1990	2000
142	Pakistan	36	62
127	India	16	28
138	Bangladesh	41	48
96	Sri Lanka	85	94

Source: Ramaswamy (2005: 16).

Note that apart from India, the caste system and its attendant discriminations is either weak or more or less absent in the other three South Asian countries. Can we then say that India fares poorly in improving access to sanitation because of the dominance of caste system?

Did people in India always have poor access to sanitation facilities? The sophisticated sanitation and drainage system in place during the Indus Valley civilisation can be educative in this connection.

People during the Harappan times “had waterborne toilets in each house, which were linked by drains covered by burnt clay bricks” (Pathak 1995). This drainage system had manholes and chambers. But the science of sanitary engineering suffered a setback with the decline of the Indus Valley civilisation. “From then on, the toilets in India remained primitive and open defecation became rampant” (Pathak 1995).

The later day religious texts, *Narad Samhita* or *Vajasaneyi Samhita*, mention that one of the duties of slaves is “disposal of human excreta” (Ramaswamy 2005). Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese Buddhist scholar who visited India from 630 AD to 645 AD mentions in his travelogue that division of society was based on caste, the concept of untouchability existed, and the Chandalas or Sudras had to live outside villages.

With the emergence of caste and untouchability—Ambedkar dates its origin to 400 CE—no need arose to revisit the setback suffered by sanitary engineering because a section of people was assigned the duty to collect excreta. The equation between excreta and “pollution” in Hindu society has led to the scandalous neglect of sewage management. Gita Ramaswamy, throws light on this situation:

In large parts of western world, the connection between human excreta and disease is well established. Human excreta is the principal vehicle for the transmission and spread of a wide range of communicable diseases.... In India, excreta is seen as impure.... Traditional practice has failed to keep up with scientific disposal of excreta, leading to skewed practices, particularly in the matter of having someone else to clean up behind us. Excreta avoidance is ritualised: the bath is taken after defecation... Caste Hindu society did not ever mind that public places were soiled by excreta but insisted that inside of the house should be free of excretions...

Given such ritual avoidance of excreta, and the reality that excreta cannot be avoided after all, caste Hindu society, not surprisingly, found the solution in ‘polluted’ castes who would manually handle excreta. Scavenging and caste are thus intimately linked (Ramaswamy 2005: 14).

### Rumblings Within

The ongoing narrative may just create an impression that there has been no resistance from the Dalit communities to the continuing oppression. Nothing can be further from the truth.

In fact, one notices fresh rumblings within the community to challenge the age-old “profession,” and a large section of the youth are ready to discard the profession. Movements like the Safai Karmachari Andolan and others have organised the demolition of dry latrines at various places, and there have been occasions when people have spontaneously come forward to collectively burn the broom and basket which is used in scavenging.

Members of the Safai Karmachari Andolan, community-based organisations (NGOs) or even well-meaning individuals, who are active in the community, are working towards exposing the prevalence of manual scavenging in different forms in all states of the country. They

have undertaken the task of demolition of dry latrines and rehabilitation of manual scavengers. Further they are involved in exposing and criticising the casteist mindset of the government. In 2012–13, the Government of India allotted Rs 100 crore for the rehabilitation of manual scavengers, but in that entire financial year, the authorities did not bother to spend even one rupee on rehabilitation. And nobody was held accountable for that. Various organisations have approached the judiciary for intervention in the implementation of laws meant for prohibition and rehabilitation of manual scavengers.

We can see that their appeal to the scavenger community to leave the “unclean profession,” which has stigmatised them for centuries together, or the *jhadoo chhodo, kalam uthao* (leave the broom, take up the pen) slogan raised by many conscious individuals has its origins in the historic satyagraha led by Ambedkar in Mahad in 1927. Here Dalits and many like-minded people from other communities marched to a local lake (called Chavdar *Talab*) to challenge the diktat issued by the upper-caste people that Dalits could not draw water from it. In the ensuing conference of the untouchables, which met at Mahad, it was decided that no untouchable “shall skin the dead animals of the Hindus, shall carry it or eat the carrion.” As Ambedkar explained the situation in one of his articles

The object of these resolutions was twofold. The one object was to foster among the Untouchables self-respect and self-esteem. This was a minor object. The major object was to strike a blow at the Hindu Social order.

The Hindu Social Order is based upon a division of labour which reserves for the Hindus clean and respectable jobs and assigns to the untouchables dirty and mean jobs and thereby clothes the Hindus with dignity and heaps ignominy upon the untouchables. The resolution was a revolt against this part of the Hindu Social Order. It aimed at making the Hindus do their dirty jobs themselves (qtd in Ramaswamy 2005: 99).

The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is an attempt to popularise the broom once again, rather glamorise it, and thus cleverly bypass the voices of resistance. Interestingly in his hurry to “do a Gandhi,” Modi launched the campaign from the same

Valmiki Basti in Delhi where Gandhi had stayed for a while, without bothering that such a move would further stigmatise the community. While the media did not bother to question the venue chosen by the Prime Minister to start his campaign, many close watchers of the situation did not feel surprised as they knew how Modi looks at this occupation, which finds mention in his book *Karmyog*, where he calls it as some kind of “spiritual experience”.<sup>5</sup> Talking about safai kamdars in one of his speeches, Modi said:

I do not believe that they have been doing this job just to sustain their livelihood. Had this been so, they would not have continued with this type of job generation after generation....At some point of time, somebody must have got the enlightenment that it is their (Valmikis’) duty to work for the happiness of the entire society and the Gods; that they have to do this job bestowed upon them by Gods; and that this job of cleaning up should continue as an internal spiritual activity for centuries. This should have continued generation after generation. It is impossible to believe that their ancestors did not have the choice of adopting any other work or business (Modi 2007: 48–49).

When I was reading extracts from *Karmyog*, I thought there was a strange commonality between the observations of the Barve Committee formed in 1949 to look into the grievances of the manual scavengers and the Malkani Committee, which was formed in 1965. The Barve Committee had even made the offensive suggestion that the scavengers do not consider their work dirty and in fact even blamed the victims:

Ancestors of these Bhangis were just field labourers of a low caste, but never did the work of scavenging. Some of these people took to the dirty work of cleansing the latrines for the sake of profit. Slowly this developed into a monopoly. The stage was reached when the Bhangis wanted to exploit this monopoly and a sort of customary right was thus developed. By force of habit the Bhangi lost his self-respect to such an extent that he did not consider the dirty work of cleansing latrines as a curse from which he should endeavour to extricate himself (Ramaswamy 2005: 64).

Commenting on the “customary rights” of scavengers, the Malkani Committee said:

Scavenging has been a way of life for the family. A fatalistic attitude pervades the whole outlook due to the lack of education

and the absence of other openings for employment (Ramaswamy 2005: 64).

Coming back to Modi’s remarks—these got published in the *Times of India* in November 2007 and were translated and republished in few Tamil newspapers. There was a massive reaction of Dalits in Tamil Nadu for calling their menial job a “spiritual experience.” Modi’s effigies were burnt in different parts of the state. Sensing trouble, Modi immediately withdrew 5,000 copies of the book, but still stuck to his opinion. Two years later, addressing 9,000-odd safai karmacharis, he likened the safai karmachari’s job of cleaning up others’ dirt to that of a temple priest. He said, “A priest cleans a temple every day before prayers, you also clean the city like a temple. You and the temple priest work alike” (Shah 2012).

It would have been enlightening for Modi if he could have browsed through Ambedkar’s writings just to know how he had reacted when Mahatma Gandhi had similarly called “scavenging as the noblest service to society” and had said “How sacred is this work of cleanliness!” (1925). In response to Gandhi’s views, Ambedkar said

To preach that poverty is good for the Shudra and for none else, to preach that scavenging is good for the untouchables and for none else and to make them accept these

onerous impositions as voluntary purposes of life, by appeal to their failings is an outrage and a cruel joke on the helpless classes which none but Mr Gandhi can perpetuate with equanimity and impunity. In this connection one is reminded of the words of Voltaire ... ‘Oh! mockery to say to people that the sufferings of some brings joy to others and works good to the whole. What solace is it to a dying man to know that from his decaying body a thousand worms will come into life’ (qtd in Ramaswamy 2005: 96).

Also apart from the prevalence of the notions of pollution and purity, which are important cultural beliefs responsible for the prevalence of insanitary practices, an added complication has also arisen because of the different manner in which different religious communities in the country defecate. Mihir Sharma in his book *Restart: The Last Chance for the Indian Economy* tells us that for defecating

80% rural Hindus use the fields while only 50% Muslims do so. Up to 40% Hindus who have access to ‘working government latrine’ won’t use it, whereas only 7% of Muslims who have similar access will defecate outside (qtd in Bajpai 2015).

Interestingly his is not the first study of its kind which brings out the differences in toilet habits between the two communities. A paper by Michael Geruso and Dean Spears titled “Sanitation and Health Externalities: Resolving the Muslim Mortality Paradox?” also underlines the fact that

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prevalence of open defecation (hereafter OD) is particularly high among India's Hindu majority. Data from the most recent wave of the National Health and Family Survey of India show that as of 2005, 67% of Hindu households defecate in the open—e.g, in fields, near streets, or behind bushes. In comparison, only 42% of the relatively poorer Muslim households do so (2014).

They further add that

Ramaswami (2005) and Bathran (2011) attribute the modern persistence of OD among Hindus in India to the persistence of the Hindu caste system: the ritual avoidance of excreta is maintained not only by keeping defecation away from the home, but also by relegating its cleanup to the untouchables (2015).

**Sanitising the Discourse on Caste**

The “silencing” or “sanitising” of the discourse on caste in the packaging and presentation of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan reminds one of the manner in which the Gujarat government made untouchability “disappear” on paper in the state sometime back, despite its persistence on the ground.

One should have a look at the Gujarat government-sponsored report titled the

“Impact of Caste Discrimination and Distinctions on Equal Opportunities: A Study of Gujarat,” authored by scholars from the Centre for Environment Planning and Technology University (CEPT) led by R Parthasarathy, which calls caste discrimination a matter of “perceptions.” In his blog “True Lies” senior journalist Rajiv Shah has provided a detailed critique of this study.<sup>6</sup>

To put in a nutshell, the CEPT report was the state government’s response to an exhaustive study titled “Understanding Untouchability” done by a Ahmedabad-based NGO Navsarjan Trust in collaboration with Robert F Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights in 2009. The report demonstrated with concrete data the wide prevalence of untouchability both in public and private spheres in rural Gujarat. It is important to note that the results of the Navsarjan study were widely covered by the media.

Worried that the findings of the report might dent the well-cultivated image of a samras Gujarat under Modi, a panicky state government asked the CEPT to review and verify Navsarjan’s findings. In

fact, the government seemed so keen to give a clean chit to itself that it adopted a two-pronged approach to tackle the uncomfortable situation in which it found itself. Apart from commissioning the above-mentioned study, it constituted a committee under the chairmanship of the then minister for social justice, Fakirbhai Vaghela, and secretaries of different concerned departments to refute the findings of the report. The government instructed its officers to get affidavits from the Scheduled Caste residents of villages stating that untouchability did not exist.

Commenting on the government report, Rajiv Shah says that “the nearly 300-page report....far from being a review of ‘Understanding Untouchability,’ is more of an effort to justify the evil practice” (Shah 2012). As opposed to the survey of 1,589 villages done by Navsarjan, the CEPT team surveyed just five villages. “They were made to dig out a plethora of caste-wise data on agriculture, irrigation, employment and distribution of government schemes.” But “they refused to collect any data on

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‘caste discrimination’” (term used in lieu of untouchability), citing that “‘opinion-based survey’ is an unsound academic practice when people’s behavior is involved” (Shah 2012).

The reluctance of the scholars to even mention the untouchability word can be gauged from the observations made by a leading sociologist Ghanshyam Shah, who has also written a critique of the CEPT report “Understanding or Ignoring Untouchability? How Gujarat Government-sponsored Study Examines Discrimination in a ‘Very Casual Way’.” Ghanshyam Shah observes

CEPT has completely ignored to study the practice of untouchability. Perhaps for them like the GOG it is a non-issue. And, they have carried out mainly a socio-economic survey in five villages. The authors do not feel the need to argue why they have confined their study to socio-economic survey. Why have they not correlated socio-economic data with the presence or absence of untouchability? (2013).

While the CEPT experts could not discover untouchability in the five villages covered, the Navsarjan team which visited all the five villages studied by the CEPT, “found how the dalits live under subjugation and a state of helplessness as they know that the government would not protect them if they assert for their rights” (2013).

In fact, an important omission from the CEPT report was that of Valmikis themselves, who are considered lowest in the social ladder under a *varnacracy*. As opposed to these worst victims of untouchability, the report focuses on the Vankars, a “socially acceptable” Dalit community involved in weaving.

The omission of Valmikis in a report commissioned by the government cannot be considered inadvertent. Their work still remains confined to sweeping and cleaning; collecting and handling dust, garbage and filth of the cities, towns and villages to make them liveable for other dwellers. And in the process, they face daily humiliations and even death due to “accidents” or get afflicted with occupational diseases. This is a reality which cannot be ignored anymore. Perhaps, the scholars might have felt that the sheer presence of Valmikis in a government report was not in sync

with the media-propelled image of the best-governed state, occupying number one position in the country where development is concerned.

### Concluding Remarks

The implementation of the Clean India Campaign involves tremendous human as well as financial resources. “The government reaffirmed its pledge while presenting its second budget for a cleaner India and recommitted itself to achieving a target of building 6 crore toilets across the country in five years” (*Times of India* 2015). This initiative will cost the government Rs 62,009 crore; out of this amount, a sum of Rs 14,620 crore will be contributed by the government and the remaining will be raised from the corporate sector and other sources (*Times of India* 2015). It is also being said that main goal of the programme is to end open defecation in the country, as nearly half of India’s 1.2 billion people have no access to toilets.

All this sounds good and very soothing to the ears of the non-resident Indians (NRIs), who are worried about the image India carries in the comity of nations. But all these efforts might fail to produce results, because there is a conscious attempt not to address the key issues. It appears that Modi seems to be in a big hurry to leave an impact on history. And he just might be successful like his predecessors. Today we associate *garibi hatao* (remove poverty) with Indira Gandhi or the “Age of Computers” with Rajeev Gandhi. Similarly, future generations would remember or associate the “Clean India Campaign” with Modi, who heads a country considered one of the dirtiest in the world.

### NOTES

- 1 A caveat is needed here. It needs to be underlined that reason for their being alcoholic is basically because of the nature of their filthy job only and it has not to do with their choice. In private interaction with few sewer workers, they explained why they take alcohol. According to them, without it is impossible to “enter the sea of filth.”
- 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEPeOpJnBd4>.
- 3 Figures released by Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India.
- 4 According to unofficial figures, the number crosses 13 lakh.
- 5 The book was a compilation of Modi’s speeches

to Indian Administrative Service officials at various points of time and was published by the Gujarat government in 2007. Gujarat State Petroleum Corporation, a top-ranking PSU was roped in to fund the book.

- 6 For further details, see Shah (2012).

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