



In a month which sees Modi feted for the Swachh Bharat Mission, a newly-appointed sweeper working for the Corporation of the City of Panaji (CCP) was hauled up by her superiors for covering her nose with her own scarf while sweeping – because it shows, they said, that she is not serious about her job.

The first issue here is that the CCP – in the 21st century – does not provide sweepers with any protective gear at all. In the developed world, public cleaners dress like astronauts, completely covered from top to toe in helmet, mask, bodysuit, gloves, and boots; plus, they do not sweep but drive cleaning machines. But this state, which has the money for lavish memorials for late chief ministers – and this country, which has the money for satellite missions and biggest statues in the world – have no money for cleaning machines nor even basic protection for cleaners.

On top of this, they do not want them to protect themselves either. Why? Because it is their caste-ordained duty to get covered in dirt? It is no coincidence that almost all sanitation workers come from the most discriminated-against communities. In this connection one recalls Delhi Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal's, announcement that his government was going to provide 'free' safety kits to sanitation workers. As Dhamma Darshan Nigam (National Co-ordinator, Safai Karmachari Andolan) pointed out, Kejriwal is not doing a favour by providing the safety kits for free. Does the government ever say they are going to provide 'free' chairs, tables, pens, and paper to the babus they employ, or 'free' blackboards and desks to teachers? No, those are considered essential provisions for the job. Then why was the word 'free' used here? Because Kejriwal, like all dominant castes, believes that sanitation workers are really not supposed to have protective gear?

The Swachh Bharat Mission has, of course, never claimed interest in the working conditions of cleaners. Its interest is in making India 'Open Defecation Free' (ODF). Thus we learnt some months ago that Goa was the worst state in the ODF ratings, and was also the lowest in individual household toilets. The rest of India has apparently made huge strides in stopping open defecation, with most states achieving near-100% status. But, according to data released by the Union Ministry for Drinking Water and Sanitation in May this year, just 5.87% of Goa's villages were ODF, the lowest in the country. And it was one of only 4 states which had failed to achieve 100% Individual Household Toilet coverage.

Now let us ignore the fact that all these figures and ratings seem more than a little questionable. Let us especially ignore the part about most Indian states being nearly 100% ODF, and also nearly 100% in the usage of individual household toilets. If people want to believe this – that in a country where many, if not most, people do not have well-constructed,

homes, where many homes do not have water connections, where water connections – like other public infrastructure – are provided on a casteist basis, where the current wide usage of traditional dry toilets means that the murderous and caste-based job of manual scavenging of human waste is as widespread, despite laws banning it and Supreme Court judges pontificating against it – if, despite all this, people can honestly believe that almost everybody in India now uses her/his own toilet, good luck to them. (They probably also believe that all is well in Kashmir.)

The Research Institute for Compassionate Economics in fact published a survey in late 2018 which said that between 42% and 57% of rural people above the age of 2, in UP, Bihar, Rajasthan, and MP, defecate in the open. These, however, are states that the central government had listed as ODF.

Leave that aside. What we want to discuss is our apparently not-so-Swachh Goa which has however now, on September 1st, suddenly been declared 100% ODF by the state government. Hurrah – except that we all know that, once again, this is a falsehood. The announcement was received with complete public disbelief, with scores of people in Goa saying that they have no toilets, and also by media reports of missing toilets, i.e. toilets declared as built in official records, but missing on the ground. Plus, there are cases like that of Shahunagar vaddo of Ibrampur village, Pernem, where people's applications to build individual household toilets are pending for years, thanks to the refusal by the village panchayat to give the required no-objection-certificates on the atrociously casteist ground that the applicants must first do their traditional caste duty of playing the drum during religious festivities before they will be allowed this basic infrastructure. This situation, completely ignored by the government, is apparently also to be found in Bicholim and Sattari talukas. There are also cases, as in Canacona taluka, of people who want to apply for household toilets but have not, because there is no promise of either financial or technical help from the authorities.

So, how could the government have the cheek to claim that the state is 100% ODF? Apparently, the criterion for declaring a place Open-Defecation-Free is not what you would think – that everybody should have easy access to safe and clean toilets. The criteria, as laid down by the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, are that (1) there should be no visible faeces in the environment, and (2) households and institutions should use 'safe technology options' for disposal of faeces. But state governments are allowed to interpret this as they like, and so, what this means in Goa is that some reliably incompetent authority has to certify that there are enough enough public and community toilets for the population.

It doesn't matter to our powers-that-be that public and community toilets just do not work in

India, that they will always be dilapidated and filthy, because of poor construction of anything built for the public and especially for those considered 'low', poor supplies of water and electricity for the same reason, and, most of all, because of the inhuman treatment meted out to those who are expected to keep such facilities clean. Public toilets have become commonly associated with filth and stench, so much so that proposals to build them are usually greeted with protests from those living nearby. And, in fact, many of the public toilets built in a rush in Goa are already announced as 'temporary', which means that they are not even intended to last.

That all this is happening in Goa is ironic. This is a place that could set an example to others in dry toilets, viz. the old pig toilets, which used to be a part of many urban and rural homes. There are also more compact dry bio-toilet designs available now. And in any case, Goa does not yet face a shortage of water – except, of course, courtesy our criminally incompetent government, as seen in August – so water-dependent individual toilets should also work fine. If, of course, you have a government interested in solving this problem.

But we don't. The discriminatory access to household toilets remains unchallenged, as also the inhuman working conditions of cleaners. Such is Swachhness in a caste society.

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