

Turning Citizens into Mendicants*

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The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, at least the image through which it is expressed, of celebrities descending from limousines in sundry locations to sweep away the “clean garbage” (mainly leaves and such like) which have been carefully deposited there by official workers prior to their arrival, is not just kitsch; it betrays an obnoxious social outlook. The celebrities who wield the broom for a few minutes, far from obliterating the difference in social status between themselves and the class of regular broom-wielders, are actually asserting and underscoring that difference by this very act. It is “slumming” on their part, a brief, sanitized, but patronizing, foray into a world inhabited by dalits which simultaneously constitutes an assertion of their superior social status.

One should not however be too harsh on the celebrities. Their life is such they must have “photo-ops”; they can hardly be expected to let such a golden opportunity, of being photographed while engaged in an apparently “patriotic cause”, slip by. What is really disturbing is that this obnoxious social outlook now appears to be permeating the State itself.

It is estimated that Swachh Bharat would require the construction of 12 crore toilets at a cost of Rs.1.96 lakh crores; but this sum apparently is supposed to come not so much from the government’s budget as from philanthropy, through the invoking of “corporate social responsibility”. Even the manpower required for Swachh Bharat is to be provided not through an increase in the number of government employees engaged for the purpose, but through voluntary work. The State in short is now planning to abdicate its responsibility for providing sanitation infrastructure to its citizens and is leaving the task to the corporate sector (together with voluntary labour).

This amounts to a massive social retrogression. It is the Constitutional obligation of a modern State to meet the elementary requirements of its citizens. In India the Directive Principles of State Policy lay down these obligations of the State. Correspondingly, every citizen has a right to demand the fulfilment of these requirements from the State, which is what confers dignity upon the citizen, makes the citizen a member of a “fraternity of equals” upon which the State rests. By contrast, a citizen, qua a citizen, cannot demand that some corporate house should build a toilet in his or her neighbourhood. “Corporate social responsibility” is thus merely a highfalutin way of asking the corporate sector to be charitable. When people have to rely on corporate charity for getting their sanitation infrastructure, they can only do so as mendicants. They have to persuade some corporate house, as a beggar has to persuade some potential alms-giver, to part with some money for their benefit.

The shifting of the responsibility for building the sanitation infrastructure from the State to the so-called “social conscience” of the corporate sector, is tantamount therefore to pushing people from the status of being dignified citizens, members of a fraternity of equals, to the status of being mendicants dependent upon the charity of a specially privileged class of their fellow countrymen. Underlying the grandiose plan of Swachh Bharat is really an assault, at an epistemic level, on the democratic nature of modern India and its conceptual underpinning.

Exactly the same can be said apropos the suggestion that corporate houses and rich celebrities should “adopt” particular villages to bring about “uplift” there (and the Prime Minister reportedly has already “adopted” one village). For the people of those villages, being “adopted” by a section of their fellow countrymen is an act of condescension towards them, which they may put up with, in their desperation, but which scarcely respects their dignity. And when a democratic State elevates such “adoption” into an officially-sponsored means of improving the villagers’ lot, it is violating its Constitutional responsibility, and going against the democratic ethos by pushing citizens into the status of mendicants.

This argument, some may feel, is going too far. But this feeling itself, I submit, is based on an implicit epistemic rejection of democracy. The reason why the obnoxiousness of this devaluation of citizens to the status of mendicants does not strike us, is because many of us belonging to the upper echelons of this caste-ridden society, never took the idea of universal “citizenship”, the idea of every citizen being a member of a fraternity of equals, seriously anyway. True, the hoi polloi have got the vote; they can no longer be treated in daily interactions the way they used to be. But the idea of an India of equals, even of juridical, let alone social and economic, equals, has always appeared far-fetched to much of the Indian elite.

Notwithstanding our Constitutional provisions, there has hardly ever been an epistemic acceptance of equality in this country and of the concept of a fraternity of equal citizens. This de facto episteme is now being made de jure, which is a serious shift. This shift, though in sync with the inequality built into our psyche by the caste-system, has been effected by the pursuit of neo-liberalism.

The argument that the State lacks the resources to undertake adequate investment in sanitation infrastructure, apart from being rooted in this very anti-democratic episteme, is palpably absurd. The resources which the corporate houses are supposed to spend on sanitation infrastructure, for discharging their so-called “social responsibility”, could be taken by the State through taxation to provide the very same infrastructure, and in the process accord to the beneficiaries of such spending the dignity of being citizens of a democratic country. The fact that the State does not do so is because taxing corporate houses, even for State spending for such a vital social need, gets eliminated from the agenda in a neo-liberal economy. The State has to devote (or forego) resources to the benefit of corporate houses, to “incentivize” them for effecting larger growth; but it cannot take resources away from corporate houses for the benefit of the people.

As a result, under the neo-liberal dispensation, just as countries have to vie with one another for attracting direct foreign investment on to their soils for promoting economic growth, villages and localities have to vie with one another for attracting corporate “social responsibility” spending (or for being “adopted”) for getting their sanitation infrastructure. The logic that was hitherto visible at the level of countries is simply being extended now to the level of villages. Mendicant countries are now being supplemented by mendicant villages within countries, as the inexorable logic of neo-liberalism plays itself out.

In the process we are now imparting a new intellectual twist to the theory of “trickle down”. The original argument was that the State must promote the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy because the benefits of the growth that would ensue

would “trickle down” to everyone in society. When this turned out to be vacuous, the argument was changed: the State, it was now claimed, should promote the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy because the growth that would ensue, even when its benefits do not automatically “trickle down”, would enable the State to garner larger tax revenue, and spend larger amounts, to benefit everyone in society. But when this too has been shown to be vacuous (with even programmes like MGNREGA being wound up), we now have a new argument: the State must promote the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy because the growth that would ensue would leave larger resources in this oligarchy’s hands for spending for the people as part of its “corporate social responsibility”! The crux of the argument has always remained the same: the State must promote the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy!

What we are witnessing in India today (and in the world in general) is a brazen attempt to roll back “popular sovereignty” and to re-define the role of the State. “Popular sovereignty” can be exercised through a democratic State, and this exercise has meaning only if the State can intervene directly to improve the lives of the people. The people in other words are “sovereign” only in so far as they have the capacity to intervene, through the instrumentality of a democratic State, to change their own material lives, which presupposes in turn that improving their material lives is the responsibility of, and within the province of, the State. This presumption had been so widely accepted till recently that all socialist, social democratic and even liberal bourgeois political formations could be counted, broadly speaking, among its adherents.

What we are now witnessing is an undermining of this consensus position. This however also undermines the basis of democracy, for why should anyone bother to vote at all, if all elected governments pursue the same policy of promoting the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy, and leave people’s welfare to this oligarchy’s so-called “social responsibility”?

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