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Assa Doron & Ira Raja

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The cultural politics of shit: class, gender and public space in India

ASSA DORON and IRA RAJA¹

[Development studies] is a field that postcolonial studies rarely cites. The same, in reverse, can be said of development studies *vis a vis* postcolonial brethren and epistemologies. Two giant islands of analysis and enterprise stake out a large part of the world and operate within it—or with respect to it—as if the other had a bad smell.²

Introduction

In his recent visit to Australia, the newly elected Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited the Indian diaspora in Australia to join his efforts to clean up India and bolster his flagship programme, *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Campaign). His argument was compelling: ‘Dirt attracts illness and the poor man suffers, due to which work days are lost and monetarily too. I invite your participation in the drive’, he said, urging individuals to build at least one toilet in the village of their origin in India.³

The practical bent of Modi’s plea—each one, build one toilet—has a special appeal for the diaspora and for foreign observers, for what Christine Sylvester would describe as their uncritical faith in the ‘winning virtues of the West’ characteristic of the modernization approach.⁴ Further, Modi’s appeal taps into key concerns and values that have underpinned global politics and economics in the past several decades: an increased focus on humanitarian issues at the expense of a socio-political analysis. If there were enough toilets in the country, the argument goes, the poor wouldn’t have to suffer the indignity of having to defecate in the open. Recent budgetary allocations, which have cut back heavily on social sector spending on health and sanitation, while leaving intact the budget for infrastructure in the same area, only confirm this approach.⁵ If we can make enough toilets for everyone to go around, the sanitation problem would be solved, Modi suggests, displaying no self-reflexivity about a mode of problem solving that is wearily reminiscent of the long-discredited focus of the development studies going back to the 1960s.⁶ And yet, as demonstrated by the case widely reported in the international media of the rape and murder of two teenage girls from the Badaun District in Uttar Pradesh,⁷ who had stepped out after dark to relieve themselves in the nearby fields, by casting the vulnerability to violence of women who defecate in the open as a humanitarian rather than a political issue we only end up concealing the cultural, political and economic conditions that give rise to such violence in the first place.

In this essay we seek to interrogate the cultural, political and economic conditions that give rise to the sanitation crisis in India, with its severe implications for the poor and marginalized. The key question we ask is how to interpret and explain the spectre of ‘open defecation’ in India’s countryside and its booming urban centres. The discussion is divided into three parts. Part one examines the cultural interpretation of ‘shitting’ as symbolic action underpinned by ideas of purity, pollution and ‘the body politic’. Part two takes the political economic approach to gain further insights into the discourse, performance and cultural politics surrounding toilets and open defecation in India. The final part interrogates civil society activities, state campaigns and media accounts of open defecation to explore the disruptive potency of everyday toilet activities for social life and public health, and how these interplay with social, ritual and gender hierarchies, conceptions of public and private, shame and humiliation. Drawing on interviews and a review of ethnographic work, we seek to interrogate the idiom of modern sanitation, with its emphasis on cleanliness, progress and dreams of technology, as a constitutive idea and an explanatory force in Indian modernity.

World Toilet Day and the aesthetics of shit

According to the latest report released by the World Health Organization (WHO), ‘Globally, India continues to be the country with the highest number of people (597 million people) practicing open defecation.’⁸ The nature of the problem itself, some have argued, makes it an unpopular subject that people prefer to avoid.⁹ As the UN Secretary General recently put it: ‘Sanitation is a sensitive issue. It is an unpopular subject. Perhaps that is why the sanitation crisis has not been met with the kind of response we need—but that must change.’¹⁰

Yet is it really the unpleasantness of the subject that has led to its neglect? What precisely is the nature of the crisis, and who views it as such? Is the problem, as defined and perceived by those who live in its midst, different from the views and perceptions of external observers? What, in particular, are the assumptions that underwrite the ‘sanitation crisis’ perspective, promulgated by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in which the practice of ‘open defecation’ is not only a public health concern, but also a violation of human rights for the people ‘forced’ to defecate in the open?

Some preliminary answers to these questions may be found by looking at the recent art installation in Zurich, Switzerland, 2013, to mark World Toilet Day (see [Figure 1](#)). What does this visual tell us? First, it is a plea for the international community to recognize the humiliating, not to mention dangerous, conditions in which millions of people across the third world live today. It is a call for help and recognition on behalf of international NGOs and charity bodies which are working to tackle the problem (possibly through increased funding) of sanitation in countries where open defecation is widely practised. World Toilet Day is now built into our ‘save the world calendar’, so that we can stop and consider the devastating effects of the ‘lack of loos’, especially for the most vulnerable in society: women, children and older people. But what else should we consider? How else can we read this picture?



Figure 1.
World Toilet Day 2013, a UN campaign aimed at raising awareness of sanitation issues

Anthropologists will immediately notice how brilliantly this exhibition of ‘third world poo’ uses the oldest trick in the book to grab attention. As Mary Douglas famously put it, dirt is ‘matter out of place’, and as such will set off alarm bells, invoke social anxiety and capture our attention. ‘Shit’, waste, and rubbish are considered polluting and dangerous, violating the order of things, transgressing bodily boundaries and posing a threat to the social order. If this has something to do with a scientific concern for hygiene and its usefulness in preventing disease, it has equally to do with our ideas, beliefs and expectations about social order: ‘poo should be in the loo’, not out in public.¹¹

An equally interesting point about this installation is that (we suspect) this ‘shit’ does not stink: this is Switzerland after all! Besides, one’s own shit never stinks anyway, and if it did one wouldn’t know, thanks to the sophisticated sewage system which will carry it away expeditiously out of sight. The faeces featuring in the installation are deceptive for yet another reason: as most people who live or work in third world countries know too well, the solid and well-formed stools of the installation bear no resemblance to the defecations of the poor which are frequently runny and malformed.

Shit encapsulates a range of public health and bodily concerns. The particular aesthetics of the shit of the poor reflects a disturbing reality—that of bodily trauma and suffering associated with poor or inadequate food, toxic environment, contaminated water and chronic disease. There are nearly 1.7 billion cases of diarrhoeal disease recorded every year globally,¹² and it is most rampant in countries with low levels of sanitation. Considering that diarrhoea kills nearly 760,000 children under the age of five each year (the second leading cause of death amongst children in that age group), runny stools is not just a matter of periodic inconvenience but a source of tremendous loss and personal suffering.

In other words, the story told by the ‘idealized’ and aestheticized Zurich installation is not simply one that the West tells about the non-West. It is equally a story about the West itself and its understanding of what constitutes a crisis of sanitation, how technologies of waste management should function, and meanings attached to private and public spaces.

In the Western world, as Gay Hawkins has argued, ‘publics don’t shit’,¹³ only individuals do, and in very particular ways: engaging in secret rituals of ‘self maintenance’ that, in turn, guarantee public health and civic order. ‘Waste’, she contends, ‘functions as a marker of the structural differentiation between the realm of intimacy and public life.’¹⁴ In our defecatory social order, we simply ‘flush and forget’. So naturalized has this activity become that unless the infrastructural arrangements set in place to remove the sight and smell of our waste break down, resurfacing from the nether regions of the earth,¹⁵ the distinction between private (personal responsibility) and public (government responsibility) waste remains intact.

The Zurich installation, honouring World Toilet Day, brings to the forefront what is routinely consigned to the backstage of existence. The confronting sight of shit as artefact, scattered on the polished streets of Zurich, invites us to reflect on the cultural history of human waste and the political economy of its management. This seems to be Zizek’s conclusion when he sums up his comparison of British, French and German toilets with the claim that ‘as soon as you flush the toilet you are in the middle of ideology’.¹⁶ In what follows we examine the ideology that underwrites the categorization of open air defecation as a crisis for the postcolonial nation.

‘Publics that shit’: a cultural interpretation

For India’s colonial rulers, urban public spaces were typically chaotic. Used for all sorts of domestic tasks, ‘like rituals of washing, changing, sleeping, urinating and cooking’,¹⁷ native streets and bazaars were frequently characterized as disordered, filthy and threatening. Such uncanny display of bodily functions in public spaces reinforced an Orientalist discourse about primitive cultures’ failure to distinguish between public and private, driving colonial attempts to ‘impose an alternative metropolitan spatial order wherein a network of manicured, broad avenues [were] marked against the imagined disorder of the “native” quarter’.¹⁸ But as Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out, the disapproval of such ‘promiscuous’ use of public space, including open defecation, was not the preserve of Orientalists alone.¹⁹ Many nationalist leaders, most famously Mahatma Gandhi himself, are also known to have expressed their distaste for the absence of civic consciousness amongst Indians. In our own time, the concern for sanitation is perhaps best exemplified by V S Naipaul’s sheer panic at the sight of people squatting in the open, in this much cited passage from *An Area of Darkness*:

Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks. They defecate on the streets; they never look for cover. Indians defecate everywhere.²⁰

It was the anthropologist Mary Douglas who first examined Naipaul's description in a somewhat dispassionate manner. For Douglas, such acts are in fact culturally consistent with the Indian caste system. In her highly influential book, *Purity and Danger*, Douglas famously argued that dirt is 'matter out of place': a product of social disorder, that poses a threat to established categories and social arrangements, and is therefore considered polluting and dangerous. Douglas was especially incisive when discussing the polluting nature of bodily fluids, such as faeces, urine and spit, all of which are seen to press against the porous boundaries of the body. But what Douglas found particularly instructive was the Hindu caste system, and its concepts of purity and pollution, which not only governed individual conduct, but were also mirrored in the body politic.

The question for Douglas is why, given the strict regulations for maintaining bodily purity, Indians do not confine such defiling practices to the private sphere. Why they, as Naipaul put it, 'never look for cover'. She writes:

That the sociological approach to caste pollution is much more convincing than a psychoanalytic approach is clear when we consider what the Indian's private attitudes to defecation are. In the ritual we know that to touch excrement is to be defiled and that the latrine cleaners stand in the lowest grade of the caste hierarchy. If this pollution rule expressed individual anxieties we would expect Hindus to be controlled and secretive about the act of defecation. It comes as a considerable shock to read that slack disregard is their normal attitude, to such an extent that pavements, verandahs and public places are littered with faeces until the sweeper comes along.²¹

Douglas postulates that such disregard for public space is entirely in line with the caste system and its preoccupation with ritual hierarchies based on purity and pollution.

At the heart of Douglas's argument is an assumption about the relational nature of status, identity, occupation and selfhood in India, where the duties and privileges of people are in accord with their position in the ritual hierarchy. Put simply, in India it is not the individual but rather the body politic which defecates. When a large number of people, in this scheme of things, defecate in public they do so in a space that is expected to be cleaned up by sweepers—those appropriately placed to deal with polluting substances. So long as the removal of human excreta is assigned to the impure castes, the practice of defecating in public does nothing to undermine upper-caste purity. If anything, upper-caste 'purity' is seen to be *reinforced* by having the 'untouchables' perform the unclean task for them. So, contrary to Hawkins's assertion about the 'West' where 'publics don't shit', because 'public involves the active suspension of selfhood', Douglas's analysis suggests that in India, where selfhood is defined as part of the whole, publics do shit. Much as activities like eating and dressing, in India defecating also serves to reproduce the social order.

Arguably then, the debate about toilets in India is being played out simultaneously, and contradictorily, in both the symbolic and the material realms. If, on the one hand, 'shitting' stands for a differentiated access to a system of knowing (germ theories, public health) that translates into a differential access to modernity and the public domain, on the other it also stands for a world of shared meanings such as those about caste pollution.

The cultural politics of public space

In his essay 'Of Garbage, Modernity and the Citizen's Gaze', Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) returns to the question of why public spaces in India are so filthy. While drawing his inspiration from Mary Douglas, Chakrabarty attempts to nuance her overly static structural explanation by turning to a more culturally specific conception of space. He argues that derisive accounts of the usage of public spaces in India, characteristic of colonial, nationalist, and diasporic discourses, are all anchored in modernist categories of public and private, the mutually exclusive definitions of which are patently at odds with local perceptions.

According to Chakrabarty, rituals designed to render households more auspicious, or to mark out the boundaries of a neighbourhood or a village, constitute particular instances of how 'inside' spaces are managed. Drawing on ethnographic studies by scholars before him, Chakrabarty points out how the 'inside' is continuously 'produced by symbolic enclosure for the purpose of protection', against potential intrusion from malevolent forces associated with the 'outside'.²² Unlike 'the set of (enclosing) rules and rituals defining a community', he argues, the outside is a much more ambiguous space. The paradigmatic outside space for him is the bazaar. Characterized by encounters with strangers, uncertain economic transactions and anonymity, the bazaar is a space that breaches social codes. Chakrabarty concludes: 'All that do not belong to the inside (family/kinship/community) lie there, cheek by jowl, in an unsorted collection, violating rules of mixing: from feces to prostitutes. It is, in other words, a place against which one needs protection.'²³ Cultural strategies for taming such dangerous spaces vary accordingly: from bodily protection practices, to modes of address, and community-based rituals. For Chakrabarty, it is only when we appreciate the cultural interpretation of the 'outside', and its attendant ideology of pollution, that we can understand the capacity of subaltern groups to withstand dirt and disorder. Even Gandhi and likeminded nationalists, who may have been very sceptical of modernist categories, felt frustrated by the failure to foster civic responsibility amongst Indians: 'keeping the roads clean, turning taps off in the public interest'.²⁴ Chakrabarty writes:

For the modern state, and, hence for the nationalists—at least in terms of their ideals—good public health is a basic condition of existence, for there is no vigorously productive and efficient capitalism without a healthy workforce and increased longevity. And the latter, in turn, require disciplined, regulated public spaces.

Yet the nationalist call for discipline, public health and public order has largely gone unheeded by the Indian public. Chakrabarty wonders if this can be read as the larger public's 'refusal to become citizens of an ideal bourgeois order'.²⁵ He contends that the transformation of open spaces into public places is characterized by a trading of the thrills of the bazaar for the convenience of the sterile supermarket. For the vast majority of people in India who have been left out of the benefits of a capitalist economy, however, this is not such a profitable deal. Resistance to the transformation of open spaces into public places therefore comes from the unwillingness of the subaltern classes to trade the pleasures of the dirty bazaar for the minimal benefits that accrue to them under the new capitalist economy.²⁶

Chakrabarty's analysis appears to assign much of the responsibility for filth in public spaces to the 'nonbourgeois peasant-citizens'—those yet to adopt a modern way of life along with its 'attendant rituals of public life'.²⁷ It is people who subsist on the margins of the capitalist economy who resist the attempts to have public spaces sanitized. And yet, by his own account, public spaces are not inhabited by any one caste or class. The point then is not to ask, as Chakrabarty implies, who is responsible for our public spaces being filthy (we all are); the point rather is to ask, who has the choice of retreating to a private arena which is clean and hygienic, and who, on the other hand, has perforce to live with the filth and/or stay back and clean up after. In his rejoinder to Chakrabarty's thesis, Valerian Rodrigues observes that the mixing of castes typical of public spaces renders them not ambiguous but impure.²⁸ And it is precisely because these spaces are impure that they can be left to fester until someone of the right caste comes by to clean up. The filth endured in public spaces, in other words, has less to do with a certain class of people's 'refusal to become citizens of an ideal, bourgeois order',²⁹ than it has to do with the neglect of spaces people share with those beneath them in the caste hierarchy.

The tolerance for filth in public spaces however declines with the rise of the new middle class, which is no longer as inclined to retire to the interior spaces of the home as it is intent on claiming public spaces for its private consumption. Slums are now demolished to make way for malls and parks, and roads and pavements are now cleaned up for ease of access and expeditious movement of goods and people. But alongside the middle-class/upper-caste call for cleaning up public spaces, declines the tolerance for people who do not fit the description of responsible citizens committed to the regime of cleanliness and hygiene.

The poor are once again excluded, not simply for ritual and economic reasons, but for being 'deficient' citizens, 'yet to participate in [a] collective desire', that celebrates the 'pleasures of capitalism', with its rituals of personal hygiene, and the 'pleasures of privacy'.³⁰ From this perspective then, 'pathological spaces', such as the faeces-crammed railway tracks, and unruly streets, need to be cured, disciplined or sanitized; instigating a whole slew of state-sponsored actions, and public campaigns, often euphemistically labelled as 'beautification' programmes or 'relocation' of squatter settlement projects.³¹

The disciplinary measures for managing such 'pathological spaces' (e.g. streets, bazaars, railway tracks, etc) don't simply take the straightforward path of creating spatial divisions aimed at excluding the poor; they also constitute 'ordering acts that aim to correct disorder'.³² To this end, even labelling an act as 'open defecation' poses such toilet habits as a 'problem', which calls for a solution that frequently turns out to be a misguided mirroring of bourgeois values, attitudes and experiences. Not surprisingly, once the issue has been framed as a problem, as we show below, ready-made solutions modelled upon ideals of progress, technology, surveillance, and proper civil conduct fly in thick and fast.

But how do we liberate the conceptual distinction between the 'healthy' and the 'pathological' body (the latter symbolized by the term 'open defecation') from its biomedical (objectivist) overtones? How do we begin to underscore the disciplinary function of such binarism, not to mention its normative influence? One means of demystifying this practice, that admittedly must seem bizarre to outside

observers—both internationally as well as the better off nationally—is to turn to the subjective experiences of the underclass accused of open defecation, the practical concerns and calculations that constitute this seemingly random practice.³³

Subaltern spaces?

So far we have argued that ‘the cultural politics of shit’ articulates an ideal trajectory informed by a distinct vision associated with Indian intellectuals and political leadership, and more recently the middle classes, that privileges what is modern, rational and clean. At the same time, this group is constantly reminded by scornful expatriates, diasporic Indians and foreign observers that progress along these lines has been stalled.

Certainly, ‘shit stinks’ for the middle classes, who seek to promote civil order and ‘responsible’ defecation. But how do the ‘lower orders’ view these practices? Further, can we even try to recover a subaltern perspective on this issue? Where and how to find a subaltern perspective is a fraught question, especially since we know that such a viewpoint is constantly overridden by the discourse of civility, modernity, privacy, cleanliness, the language of rights and so on; these concepts are at least partly adopted by subaltern classes themselves. Scattered examples aside,³⁴ few scholars have engaged with the issue of public defecation at any length. The result is a lamentable gap in our understanding of how underprivileged classes experience and view defecation behaviour across a range of social and geographical contexts.

Arjun Appadurai’s study of ‘deep democracy’ provides a useful entry point for trying to account for and theorize defecation behaviour amongst the urban poor. He examines the toilet festivals organized by the poor and NGOs in Mumbai as an illustration of how marginalized populations make claims on the public space, as persons worthy of human dignity. These toilet festivals (*sandas mela*) exhibit functioning toilets, designed by and for the urban poor. The festivals are also strategically timed to coincide with visits from various aid organizations and state officials. The toilet technology, in its ideal form, is one that confers privacy, dignity, and equal access. Through such technical innovations the ‘private act of humiliation and suffering’ is assuaged, ensuring safety and cleanliness. Hence the position of the urban poor as humiliated victims is reversed.³⁵ For Appadurai, by canvassing the ‘politics of shit’ in such imaginative ways—toilet festivals—the slum dwellers are able to create transnational alliances to promote their cause: ‘capturing civic space and areas of the public sphere hitherto denied them’. This, he concludes, is ‘a politics of visibility that inverts the harmful default condition of civic invisibility that characterizes the urban poor’.³⁶ When subaltern groups foreground themselves as citizens of the state, staking their claim to public spaces, they transform these spaces into sites for registering a politics of hope.

Yet Appadurai’s position has come under criticism for its fairly straightforward endorsement of international civil society,³⁷ and its lingering biases towards the liberal moral thought tradition. Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay argues that the moral righteousness characteristic of global civil society, ‘with its assumptions about nature, purity and “human dignity”’, runs the risk of denying ‘a range of political responses and forms of power, thereby foreclosing other reactions to pollution

beyond moralism or resentment'.³⁸ According to Mukhopadhyay, a more productive way to understand defecation in public would be to look at localized expressions, language and practices of subalterns—which often tend to incorporate wit, humour and irony in how they deal with the issue. Rejecting the tendency to denigrate the 'lower orders' from the 'vantage point of some absolute wisdom',³⁹ Mukhopadhyay calls instead for the need to reflect on the kinds of authority people draw on, to tackle the issue. In particular he draws attention to the highly successful practices of 'planting saplings on the sidewalks and painting pictures of gods, goddesses or nationalist icons on the walls most vulnerable to pissing'.⁴⁰ Mukhopadhyay's persuasive appeal for an ethnographically rich understanding of the urban poor, and their evaluative framework, is a helpful reminder of how the favoured approach of 'empowerment' advocated by civil society bodies runs the risk of overlooking diversity, complexity and difference.⁴¹

In the absence of effective public sanitation, the urban poor make do; but the ways in which they make do are also defined by inequalities among themselves. They live in varying conditions—pavement dwellers, 'notified' and 'non-notified' slums or various forms of tenancy. Family arrangements differ—single men, families with children, fatherless households—as do the sources and security of income. In major cities, 'the poor' are likely to come from different regions, speak two or three languages and represent a number of castes. And within any slum settlement, there are likely to be power-wielders who can offer favours or impose penalties. These are some of the elements that structure the degree of poverty, indignity and vulnerability of urban slum dwellers.⁴² Unless we recognize this heterogeneity of urban slum settlements and the human complexity of their residents as people, sanitation interventions are destined to be ineffective or even to worsen inequality and destitution.⁴³

This is partly the reason why we chose to include the following example from literature, a rather long excerpt from Rohinton Mistry's celebrated novel, *A Fine Balance* (1996), which describes several men defecating on railway tracks:

'We have a loata,' said Ishvar. 'But where should we go?'

'Come with me, it's not far.' They collected their water, deposited the heavy pail in their shack, then walked towards the railway lines beyond the field with their loata. ...

'Come to the right side,' he said. 'The left side is for ladies only.' ... Past the crouching men, the three found a suitable spot. 'The steel rail is very useful,' said their neighbour. 'Works just like a platform. Puts you higher than the ground, and the shit doesn't tickle your behind when it piles up.'

'You know all the tricks, for sure,' said Om, as they undid their pants and assumed their positions on the rail.

... 'Now squatting there can be dangerous. Poisonous centipedes crawl about in there. I wouldn't expose my tender parts to them. Also, if you lose your balance in those bushes, you end up with an arseful of thorns.'

...

‘Only one problem with squatting on the rail,’ said their long-haired neighbour. ‘You have to get up when the train comes, whether you have finished or not. Railway has no respect for our open-air sundaas.’

‘Now you tell us!’ Ishvar craned his neck in both directions, searching up and down the track.

‘Relax, relax. There’s no train for at least ten minutes. And you can always jump off if you hear a rumbling.’

...

‘We’re very lucky to have you for our guru,’ said Om.

‘Yes, I’m your Goo Guru,’ he chortled.

Ishvar was not amused, but Om roared with laughter. ‘Tell me, O great Goo Guruji, do you recommend that we buy a railway timetable, if we are to squat on the tracks every morning?’

‘No need for that, my obedient disciple. In a few days your gut will learn the train timings better than the stationmaster.’⁴⁴

There are many things we could say about this fictional account, not least that it sounds rather contrived. But the value of Mistry’s account really becomes obvious when we compare it with another account of life in a Mumbai slum.

Danny Boyle’s Oscar-winning film, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), includes a disturbing scene where a young slum-dwelling boy is shown to dive into a pit of human waste, as he makes his way to a well-known film star, whose autograph he is desperately seeking. People whose lives are surrounded by filth, you would think, cannot tell the body apart from the excrement that it expels and therefore think nothing of wading through it. In psychoanalytic parlance, if shit is the first extension of the self, it is also the first instancing of the other.⁴⁵ The boy’s inability to make this crucial distinction—between the self and the not-self—points to the film’s literal infantilization of the urban poor.

Contrast this treatment of Mumbai slum dwellers in *Slumdog Millionaire* with Mistry’s alternative account of how the urban underprivileged negotiate space, both bodily and geographical. Mistry’s version, however artificial it may seem at first, is notable for its ultimate refusal to patronize the poor. His account recognizes that even those who defecate on railway lines understand space and work with boundaries. The characters in *A Fine Balance* rely on an embodied sense of space to safely negotiate their way around the dangers posed by their environment—as Rajaram points out, they had no need for the train timetable because before long their bodies would know the train timetable better than the stationmaster himself. Conversely, the characters in *Slumdog Millionaire* don’t inhabit or navigate space so much as *merge* with it. People who defecate in the open, it would seem, themselves become waste matter.

In his essay ‘V.S. Naipaul, Modernity and Postcolonial Excrement’, S Shankar observes how, ‘Moving near-hysterically through the external excremental

landscape of India, Naipaul leads his reader directly to a deeper excrementality, the degeneration of Indian culture.⁴⁶ Naipaul's tropological link between excrement and Indian culture is reproduced in Boyle's film, with the exception that excrement now stands as a trope not for Indian culture at large but for the vast underclass of migrant labour that inhabits the slums of Indian cities. Interestingly for this discussion, Mistry's novel is set during the Indian Emergency of 1975, when as part of a campaign to beautify the city, slums were being demolished in large numbers and their inhabitants removed to other locations, frequently beyond the boundaries of the city. As Mistry's novel shows, the uncle and nephew duo of Om and Ishvar, who are forced onto the street when their shelter in the slum is suddenly demolished, count amongst those most at risk of being identified as waste, and put to use (recycled?) in the work camp.

On the margins of the state and civil society

The day everyone of us gets a toilet to use, I shall know that our country has reached the pinnacle of progress. (Jawaharlal Nehru)⁴⁷

In an effort to tackle 'open defecation', the Indian state has been actively seeking to promote the usage of toilet technologies, even if it means direct intrusion into people's lives and unviable policies.⁴⁸

The current prime minister is of course not the first to try to tackle this problem. A number of policies and incentives have been introduced by state agencies, including the previous government's celebrated *Nirmal Gram Puraskar*, a programme designed to encourage and reward local councils for taking up sanitation solutions at the community level.⁴⁹ These projects have had limited success in alleviating the problem of 'open defecation', and promoting public hygiene in rural India. This is partly because these projects (as several activists we spoke to explained) plunk toilet blocks, which are themselves viewed as 'matter out of place', in the middle of where people live. Toilet blocks are being built, ostensibly for the use of a community, but clearly with little consideration of the local environment, perceptions or politics.⁵⁰ In many cases these 'white elephants' remain under lock and key only to be opened when government officials, or some VIP, come to visit.

This favouring of the 'hardware' over the 'wider political ecologies and "software" (socio, economic, cultural) dimensions' is a pattern found across the sanitation sector, which typically involves both state and donor institutions.⁵¹ An interesting subversion of this penchant for technological fixes can be found in the government-sponsored sanitation programme, 'No Toilet, No Bride'. This headline-capturing scheme stands out for its unique blending of 'tradition' and 'modernity', hardware and software. *The Times of India* recently reported:

The local administration has made the picture of the groom along with the toilet a mandatory requirement for getting registered for mass marriage ceremonies and avail benefits under the *Mukhyamantri Kanyadan Yojana* (MKY) [roughly translated into English as 'The Chief Minister's "Gift of the Bride" Wedding Ritual Scheme'.⁵²

The monetary incentive for couples who marry under the MKY scheme of the state government is ‘financial assistance to the tune of Rs 15,000 and utility gift items’. Such local programmes followed in the footsteps of the former Minister for Rural Development and Water and Sanitation, Jairam Ramesh, who in October 2012 launched the campaign, along with several other high-profile programmes.⁵³

Marriage is one of India’s most prominent institutions, and one in which ‘primordial’ caste ties remain a salient feature. Marriage is also a public performance, underpinned by a ritual economy where social relations are maintained and forged, with items of dowry, such as jewellery, clothes, and a variety of consumer goods (motorcycles, fridges, mobile phones). The recent policy means that toilets too are used to help cement such relations.

The toilet therefore becomes the base from which one is encouraged to participate in a public performance. Such public performance is not without its precedent. It taps into similar kinds of public performances, such as the mass marriages campaigns, which were historically organized by nationalist reformers to empower disadvantaged groups struggling with the social and economic demands involved in marriage arrangements. This too was part of a push inspired by Gandhi, and reformist movements such as the Arya Samaj (the Sulabh NGO also has such programmes), to purify the nation of the tyranny of tradition (the prejudice of gender and caste), in favour of a more secularized and progressive view of religion.

The innovative campaign, ‘No Toilet, No Bride’, represents a state effort, bringing together concerns about women’s rights, public health and hygiene, as well as equality and human dignity. A modern project, it is full of the charisma of the state, practising clever social engineering to bring in sanitation, liberate women, and intervene in marriages to ensure positive social outcomes—a dream policy.

The relationship is reciprocated too because politically the men are participants in this plan, even if minimally: by demonstrating compliance with ideas of modernity, progress, rationalization and class or caste upliftment they are able to secure their marriageable credentials and future prospects as citizens of the modern state.

But an alternative, critical reading of this policy could draw on the argument made by Shilpa Phadke in her incisive observation: ‘If I had to pick one tangible symbol of male privilege, the winner hands down would be the public toilet.’⁵⁴ In urban centres toilets are a material expression of gender inequalities, with severe implications for women’s mobility outside of the domestic sphere. In rural India, the ‘No Toilet, No Bride’ campaign runs the risk of intensifying existing gender inequalities, by closing off the limited access that women have to spaces outside the home where they can meet with, socialize with and befriend other women. Traditionally at least, many women in rural areas are known to actively seek out public spaces such as the communal water tap, the river/canal side where they might go to fetch water or wash clothes. The fields and bushes where they go to relieve themselves likewise can serve as spaces for socializing with and befriending other women, at the same time as they allow them to escape the home, experienced as an oppressive space by many women. To assume that access to a private toilet would instantly render women safe from predatory men who prowl the streets is to reinforce the patriarchal claim that the home is always and necessarily safe for women, when, in fact, successive studies have documented the varieties of

violence, physical and psychological, that women can face at home on a daily basis. In these circumstances, being able to step out of the house, even if momentarily, is often a welcome respite. The point is not that we should not make provisions for private toilets, but rather to draw attention to the unstated assumptions of the campaign, which takes for granted that public spaces belong to men. Instead of challenging the cultural structures that render these spaces unsafe for women, the campaign has focused on keeping women at home as the best way of keeping them from harm's way.

For others, both men and women, being trapped inside a closed toilet cubicle is just generally viewed as unpleasant. Not surprisingly then, records show that even when people have access to private toilets many continue to go outside to relieve themselves. But for a majority of the 'untouchable' households which 'have never received toilets under the *Nirmal Bharat Abhiyaan* (NBA) scheme meant to deliver toilets to all rural households',⁵⁵ relieving themselves in open fields is not a matter of choice but compulsion, and one that can put them at great risk. This is especially so for those who do not own a piece of land to use for their bodily evacuation and are therefore forced to defecate on the property of others, often from higher castes and classes. As the horrific rape and murder of two young girls from Badaun, mentioned earlier in the article, shows, the risk involved in open defecation in rural areas is itself enmeshed in social inequalities and ritual hierarchies that are perpetuated and supported by the practices and ideologies of dominant groups.⁵⁶ However, a rather different take on the issue of open defecation is found in the following couple of comments made by members of the Chamar ('untouchable') community as they expressed their frustration at being exploited by the local Jat landlords:

Someone should set fire to the Jats' fields since they do not give laboring work and they only give us leafy sugar cane tops [as payment for cutting cane] ... In their hearts, the Jats do not want the Chamars to be able to have stoves burning in their homes, that Chamar children should die hungry ...

If the moral outrage at the treatment the Chamars had received at the hands of the Jats is only to be expected, it is given an interesting twist in the comments made by another Chamar woman who worked as a labourer for the Jats:

There is no daily wage labor here, people are forced to go outside to earn money and they come back here to defecate. And Jats even benefit when we defecate in their fields, because some time later it turns into fertilizer! Poor people can eat and drink nothing. Grain is Rs 30 for 2.5 kg and that is cooked daily, so they do not even get enough food.⁵⁷

For this Chamar woman, being forced to defecate in the field of the upper-caste Jats only points to the seamless continuity between the different ways in which her bodily resources are preyed on. Not only is Dalit labour extracted in lieu of inadequate payment, even their bodily excretions are appropriated for the benefit of their landlords. Open defecation and human waste here are not a problem to be solved, but rather a resource to be exploited. Just as, in Žižek's view, the greater abjection, suffering, and self-sacrifice of Judas makes him in some ways the hero of the New Testament, the Chamar woman's counter discursive

mobilization of excrement enables her to retrieve some measure of dignity, even heroism, from what is to an outsider a position of utter abjection.⁵⁸

Two important conclusions may be drawn from the above discussion. First, we point to the inefficacy of technological solutions in the form of grand sanitation schemes unless we target behavioural change in other spheres of life. Any attempt to address the problem must take into account the importance of context, local practice, and perceptions.⁵⁹ Second, it demonstrates how the modernist paradigm that provides the template for thinking about public defecation and for defining what constitutes ‘private’ and ‘public’ spaces is not only inadequate, but can potentially reinforce and exacerbate dominant forms of social and political life.

Class and public spaces

In addition to the state-sponsored programmes seeking to promote the building of toilets, there is also a concerted drive to address sanitation problems in urban centres: a challenge of an altogether different scale. For those amongst the middle classes the issue of sanitation has been resolved independent of state infrastructure. They reside in gated communities that rely on their own private facilities to provide them with power, sanitation, waste disposal mechanisms and clean water. When visiting the ‘outside’, the needs and wants of the middle class (however loosely defined) are accommodated in consumer-friendly hubs, such as malls, multiplexes, cafés and restaurants, most of which are installed with public restrooms, indeed, even state-of-the-art toilets. The underprivileged, many of whom are migrant labourers inhabiting the edges of the cities, however, are excluded from such consumer spaces, and for them the meaning of public space connotes a very different reality.

One of the more common ways in which the public domain is constructed as a vehicle for imparting modernist (civic) values is by declaring such areas to be ‘open defecation free zones’. A popular recourse amongst administrators and civil society groups alike is the use of humiliating techniques, as Sourabh, a social activist, recently explained:

We are building toilets to preserve people’s dignity, but what did they do in the outskirts of my city—Pune—near Lake Katraj? This was a place where people used to take a dump. The NGOs tried to stop this and caught whoever was pooping in the open and took pictures of them. They then put these pictures up on a billboard in order to discourage people from doing it. How is that preserving the dignity of the poor that we value so much?⁶⁰

Sourabh continued to recall how several years ago he participated in a workshop sponsored by UNICEF, where the ‘Name and Shame’ strategy was discussed as an effective technique to deter the practice of open defecation.

Such humiliating practices reached a new high with a YouTube clip recently going viral, called the ‘Pissing Tanker: You Stop, We Stop’ (with 3 million hits in less than a month). This professionally produced clip, set to dramatic music (a march), features a group of men wearing masks perched on a large yellow fire-truck and touring Mumbai in search of people relieving themselves in the open (see [Figures 2 and 3](#)). When they spot a man urinating in public, they aim



Figure 2.
Cleaning up the streets: a screenshot from the YouTube clip, 'Pissing Tanker'

the fire-hoses in his direction, the powerful gush of water from the hose catching him in the act. The effect is at once comical and disturbing, with some men running for cover, while others, momentarily stunned by the attack, fall to the ground.

The clip is a powerful reminder, too, of how public spaces are always marked, in this case equally by class and gender. The Pissing Tanker never finds a woman in the act but the men it targets all appear to belong to subaltern classes, and these



Figure 3.
'Pissing Tanker' in action

include scooter riders, as if it is only the underclass that pisses by the roadside, when it is common knowledge that middle-class men in private cars are frequently as guilty. Even though pissing in public spaces is primarily a masculine activity, this video gives it a class dimension that exposes its own latent bias. Further, when making a distinction between defecating and urinating, we must be careful to note that those defecating outside in urban centres have little choice in the matter, whereas urinating in the open is all too often an exercise of male privilege at large. This ‘marking’ of public space is also important when we consider that many of the rural-urban migrants experience the city and its public spaces as extraordinary, disorienting and alienating.⁶¹ In other words, class, caste, religion and gender are always at play when one moves through the city. Yet if one aspect of the freedom of the city is the capacity to move more or less unhindered between these kinds of public spaces, then one of the ‘questions’ is how people in power, like the urban bourgeoisie, impose a hierarchy of values they believe are imperative for the construction of a modern city.⁶²

The Pissing Tanker video is one clear illustration of how such middle-class values are capable of inflicting both symbolic and material violence. The clip is in fact a purification campaign; the truck actually pisses water on the men, imposing on the hapless men a planned-civic-system aimed at clearing out the filth. This is a ritual purification of space by the urban bourgeoisie which wants the city completely for itself, to mirror its ideals and aspirations. Such vigilante acts can be interpreted as the ugly face of middle-class India, frustrated and impatient at the slow pace of progress and development in their country. Hence, the slogan, ‘You Stop, We Stop’, that features on the side of the truck: a clear signal of the theory and prejudice at play.

Conclusion: the shame of the nation

The common refrain—‘the shame of our nation’—that we read in the popular media, about the ongoing practice of open defecation, is typically a middle-class cry. It is this section of society which has more cause to identify with the nation and more to lose from being viewed as pre-modern. These are the people who read more, travel more and are more exposed to consumer capitalism and global trends, and as such quite sensitive to India’s global image. Yet many of these people also inhabit gated communities that rely on their own independent infrastructure to sustain their needs and wants—essentially a vote of no confidence in the state, because it has failed to deliver.

Indian public spaces, viewed under colonial rule as being dangerous, denoting pollution and disorder, are now being reconstituted and reimagined, with the advent of economic liberalism, globalization and modernity, as places of recreation, leisure and other modes of private consumption. Yet the underclass, which remains ‘outside’ the public domain and is excluded from the spaces and pleasures of economic liberalism, is squatting down in the open spaces of India’s megacities.

There is then a strong tension between the ideals and aspirations of modern public space—where dignity, social and legal rights, civil conduct and individual meritocracy have allegedly replaced the pollution-based codes that underpinned the caste system and enduring gender inequalities. Allegedly, because the

middle classes often fail to recognize their own complicity in constructing an exclusive public sphere, and their contribution to the disenfranchisement of the poor, through a range of activities that ultimately sustain middle-class standards of living and enshrine their privileges.

We have argued that to fully appreciate the problem of ‘open defecation’ we must first interrogate the terms of the debate: the fact that it is identified as a ‘problem’ requiring particular kinds of mostly technological solutions. As such it tends to gloss over the structural inequalities and cultural forms that shape social practices and people’s experiences of the public domain. Perhaps we need to reconceptualize the realm of public space from that perspective, for it seems that neither modernist categories, Hindu culture (caste) nor universal human rights perspectives can account for how the poor and migrant communities experience the cities, because their values, aspirations and needs constitute a frame of reference that is important in its own right.

No doubt, ‘open defecation’ is an urgent concern, not least from the public health perspective. Yet the solutions and methods brought about to solve the issue are often counterproductive, if well-meaning. Looking at poo and pooing is productive of the tense and yet unresolved questions about the basis on which India is to build itself as a modern nation, and it would reward further ethnographic investigation.

Notes on contributors

Assa Doron is Associate Professor in the Anthropology Department, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

Ira Raja teaches in the Department of English, University of Delhi. She is also an Honorary Associate of the *Thesis Eleven* Centre for Cultural Sociology, La Trobe University, Australia.

Notes

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- ⁴⁰ Mukhopadhyay, 'Crossing the Howrah Bridge', p 227.
- ⁴¹ Mukhopadhyay's valuable critique could be further extended by considering an evaluative framework that draws on Hindu cosmology and transactional practices as detailed by Thomas Rosin in his study of dirt and dust in India. See Thomas Rosin, 'Wind, Traffic and Dust: The Recycling of Wastes', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 34(3), 2000, pp 361–408.

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