

# Cleanliness beyond cities, celebrities and tokenisms

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By Rajkamal Goswami

Ubiquity of garbage and the proclivity to freely litter is one of few cultural phenomena that unite the length and breadth of India. Therefore the enthusiasm that the 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' or Clean India Campaign has generated is noteworthy. It has cut across the political axes, media and civil society and aims to clean up the garbage and litter from the streets and other public spaces. Notwithstanding the cynics and critics' questioning the feasibility of the campaign beyond the token gestures of celebrities and leaders wielding the broom, the buzz in the print and social media continues. However, the inordinate focus of the campaign on cities and towns seems to suggest that garbage doesn't occur elsewhere. What about our forests? Given the perception that they are 'pristine' and 'wilderness' areas, are they automatically free from garbage and litter?

Over the years, having had the opportunity of visiting several forest sites across the country owing to my job as a wildlife researcher, I can say that the answer, unfortunately, is no. For example, in the Balpakram National Park, situated in the South Garo Hills District of Meghalaya, there is a sacred site called Kundul Gop, a breath-taking gorge also popularly known as the 'mini Grand Canyon'. Throughout the year, hundreds and thousands of people visit the Kundul Gop, mainly to picnic. Interestingly, local people who otherwise maintain impeccable cleanliness within their villages and houses do a Mr. Hyde-like turn when they picnic in forests. The entire twelve kilometers long jeep trail that culminates in a place called 'helipad' is carelessly littered with wine bottles, gutkha sachets, biscuit and chips packets and water bottles. But once at Kundul Gop, people turn sober, pay their respects to their departed souls, who they believe reside there. However, once they leave the sacred site, the unruly behaviour commences.

Kundul Gop is merely one of the several thousand picnic spots of the northeast where every nook and corner offers stunningly scenic natural vistas. Picnic is a rare popular cultural phenomena that unites the otherwise ethnically diverse and fragmented 'northeast'. The 'picnic season commences in early December, peaks during the New Year's Eve, and continues through February and early March. Ironically, the quietest and most secluded forest and natural sites are also the most popular spots with blaring music and rampant alcohol consumption being staple fare, resulting in the wilderness being torn apart by the deluge of picnickers, their noise and their garbage.

Across the north and northeast of the country, the picnic season also coincides with the nature-wildlife-tourism season which begins in November, when most remote forests including the protected areas (PAs) become accessible after the wet monsoon period and open up for tourists. Most consumers of nature-tourism belong to the urban, economically prosperous and educated middle and upper middle classes – they are the ones who can afford such an expensive break from their humdrum, noisy, polluted and busy lives. Sadly very few, if any, make efforts to modify their behaviour and attitude to preserve the tranquillity and sanctity of the places they visit. In fact, excesses of such trips, particularly in the form of alcohol consumption and revelry are the norm. Many tourists that I have encountered seem to derive a perverse gratification in getting inebriated and dancing to loud music in the more secluded parts of forested areas. The 'core' of the 'Tiger Reserves' are particularly favoured by such revellers. One Bengali male tourist, a high ranking Government employee from West Bengal, whom I had met in the Manas National Park, specifically comes to mind. He told me that his aim was to get drunk in the core area of all Tiger Reserves of India and was excited at the prospect of spending three nights in a quaint forest guest house, located in the picturesque Mothanguri area, deep within the park bordering Bhutan. "Traditionally, across India, there is a distinction between civilization and wilderness. In Tamil, it's called nadu and kadu. Anything that is taboo/frowned upon in nadu is acceptable in kadu" Janaki Lenin, prominent author and thinker specialising on environmental and

wildlife conservation issues, told me while discussing this issue. In the village/forest where Janaki lives, she observed that “people drink, meet their girlfriends/mistresses, smoke with their friends, gamble, and dump garbage as well as murder victims.”

Be it in the forests or elsewhere, focussing solely on waste collection and management will be akin to merely treating the symptom. How about addressing the root of the malady i.e. consumption? Globalisation driven neo-liberal policies of India during the last two and a half decades created a rapidly growing prosperous middle-class with easier access to markets, cheap credits and consumer loans. This led to an exponential spurt in the volume of consumption in India, thereby generating more and more garbage. Paradoxically, the current dispensation, which places growth and development above everything else which is impossible to sustain without high consumption rates, also sells us the chimera of clean and glittering ultra-modern cities. But it chooses to stay silent on the social and environmental costs of such cleanliness campaigns. As if in the journey from the streets to the common dump-yard, the rubbish simply vanishes in thin air. Just because we do not see the waste in our vicinity, does it cease to exist? Readers of this newspaper would remember how the main entrance of the Umlawan cave, situated in Lumshnong, Jaintia Hills, which has been mapped as the longest and the deepest cave in the sub-continent, is almost blocked by garbage. Isn't this transformation, of a natural wonder to a garbage dump, a direct environmental and social cost of keeping our own houses, villages and Ilaka impeccably clean? And what about the toxic effluents generated by the mining (coal and limestone) and cement industries? Where are they dumped? Aren't Lukha and the numerous other dead rivers and the miles and miles of forests that has been cleared and degraded, bearing the immense environmental costs of such phony cleanliness and associated development? In a comical irony, the urban and rich consumers who are undoubtedly the beneficiaries of mining and industrial development, are also the greatest advocates of the cleanliness drive. Isn't it the moral responsibility of the Clean India Campaign to also clean these rivers and restore these forests? And perhaps also restore and compensate the lives and livelihoods of thousands of people that were lost owing to the death of the rivers and the disappearance of the forests? Can we dream of a 'Clean India' without attempting to find answers to these uncomfortable questions? Is the Clean India Campaign equipped to grapple with the complexities of the issue of 'modern garbage'?

In Manas, I met the same tourist again as he was on his way back to Kolkata. He looked hung over but nevertheless beamingly admitted that the three nights at Mothanguri had been his best experience to date. It was six years ago and I am sure he is well on his way to complete his ignominious bucket-list. The tragedy was that when I peeped into his jeep I didn't see the empty bottles.

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