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## **Ancient Indian Knowledge and Cultural Portrayal of Sanitation Practices in Film and Literature**

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### **Abstract:**

The paper presents the history of the evolution of the toilet in India and the impact of ancient wisdom on sanitation practices and hygiene. The research gives a glimpse into the advanced toilet technology and drainage system in the Indus valley civilization. However, this vast reservoir of knowledge was abandoned as people then stopped using physical toilets and practiced open defecation away from their homes in order to adhere to traditional beliefs. The analysis of the novel *Untouchable* (1935) by Mulk Raj Anand in light of toilet practices and Dalit exploitation is connected to loss of ancient knowledge from Indus and Harappan civilizations which was based on proper sewage management and drainage system. Similarly, the movie *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017) criticizes the hypocrisy of men who send women with their heads and faces covered in ghoonghats and veils to isolated areas far away from their habitat forcing them to open up to defecate in full public visibility. The movie also highlights that a village with mobile geeks in today's world is still stuck in time. Also, misinterpretation of religious texts and ignorance is common here as it validates patriarchy that rejects toilets and social change unlike the more progressive Indus Valley Civilization.

**Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, Sanitation, Dalit Exploitation, Patriarchy.**

The paper titled “Ancient Indian Knowledge and Cultural Portrayal of Sanitation Practices in Film and Literature” throws light on the history of the toilet in India and the impact of ancient wisdom on sanitation and hygiene. The compliance to toilet regulations, especially that of open defecation far away from homes, although originated from age- old traditional beliefs are still observed in rural areas, even in present times. The ‘toilet trope’ in the novel *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand and the popular film *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* starring star icon, Akshay Kumar and the ever- graceful Bhumi Pednekar, has its roots in the cultural significance of the toilet in India and in the Western world.

The problems highlighted in the movie *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*, directed by Shree Narayan Singh, can be clearly understood if one gains comprehensive knowledge about the history and evolution of the toilet in India and in other nations of the world. Although toilets were found during excavations in Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, it is surprising that the ancient knowledge on toilet construction and sewage techniques went into the regression mode. The Toilet was completely forgotten till it was reinvented again in the modern era. The reason for this severe drain of Indian knowledge System during all these years, roughly after 1700 BC till the 1900’s and after, may be attributed to an orthodox belief system and ignorance of the history of ancient India.

Firstly, archaeological excavations in the Indus Valley, then a part of Akhanda Bharat, now located in Pakistan, authentically proved the existence of the first water borne toilets in every house in the ancient Indian locales of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa. Going back roughly to 2500 BC, the Indus valley had well- constructed toilets and an efficient drainage system quite identical to the sewage system of modern times. With the onset of religious ideologies, the idea of the toilet as a polluted and filthy space was firmly fixed in the minds of people through ancient religious scriptures. With the passage of time, the toilet was pushed from the central domain of the home to the peripheries of forest areas and even near places adjacent to rivers.



Infact, physical toilets started disappearing from the Indian landscape and defecation in the open became the socially accepted norm. Thus, with the decline of the Indus valley civilization, the construction strategies used in building toilets and designing of the pipeline structure, which was a part of the vast reservoir of ancient Indian knowledge, was erased from the public mind. Sewage and human waste disposal have posed an enormous challenge in town planning and in the maintenance of hygiene in the distant past throughout the world. The idea of sanitation is known to have evolved in ancient societies of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, Greece and Rome. The innovative approach of the Greeks could be seen in their use of human excreta as a biofertilizer for improving crop yield and fertility of the soil. The Roman empire was well known for its public latrines in which a large number of people could engage in discussions while being seated on toilet seats close to each other. During these times, wiping oneself clean with a 'sponge on a stick' was a common practice that raised health concerns. A major leap towards integrating every house to the sewage system could have brought a great change in the outlook of people across the world. However, by the Middle Ages and moving on to the Renaissance era, sanitation practices were no longer adhered to or such observances in hygiene were completely neglected. Evidently, castles and palaces had toilet seats carved on wooden boxes through which the feces were manually flushed down the streets. People of noble rank constructed their toilet seats over a deep cesspit or the waste was led into the backyard. However, common people, who did not have any choices, just got rid of excretory matter by throwing it out of their windows across the streets. Even the River Thames in London was fully contaminated with human waste and sewage. ("Sewage, the Trace") Later on, John Harrington impressed Queen Elizabeth I by inventing the first flushing lavatory which took about 250 years to be used worldwide. Although the wooden seated toilet chair pre-dated the ceramic commode bowl, lot of technological input and innovation led to the evolution of the present- day flush toilet system. (Castelow)

In India, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the earlier half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the British officers in India used flush toilets through which waste was let off through sewers. Contrary to this, lower- caste men picked up human excretory waste manually and so they came to be known as scavengers. Yui Masuki, an academician, in his article on “Historical Development of Low-Cost Flush Toilets in India” discusses the findings of many other researchers as Conybeare regarding the challenges encountered in sewage disposal and convincing people to use toilets in India: “In mid-19th century in colonial Bombay, there was a regulation that required all privies should be situated in the rear of the houses and all solid fecal refuse was to be carried away in baskets by the sweepers or nightmen”. (Conybeare qtd. in Masuki 5) . The given extract gives a detailed overview of the kind of sewage system in India. However, the accumulation of feces in these toilets was the real problem. Sweepers collected this human waste with their bare hands. They had no choice but to handle filth and inhale these toxic gases as they were lower-caste people.

The toilet narrative of India’s past has been navigated to a great extent through Mulk Raj Anand’s novel *Untouchable* (1935). The novel presents the bitter experiences of Bakha, a poor lower- caste sweeper, who is exploited mercilessly by the upper- caste men of his village. After each higher caste man comes out of the toilet, he collects the excreta in his basket and then burns the huge bulk of the refuse near the river. Thus, the sad plight of sanitation workers, especially in the pre- independence era, can be clearly understood through the lens of the caste system that prevailed in India for centuries due to the Brahmanical discourse of the necessity of Dalit subordination for sweeping away human dung, thereby erasing Dalit identity.

The toilet, thus, becomes a site of torture as Bakha and other poor lower- caste sweepers were forced into manual scavenging. The power dynamics operating in a social set- up in which caste hierarchy is validated by religious scriptures, is greatly responsible for pushing them to perform menial tasks. In the following line: “The body is directly involved in a political field;



power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.” (Foucault 25). Bakha’s broom and basket become instrumental in interpreting his helplessness as a sign of subservience. Also, the repeated performance of the act/ (un)ceremony of cleaning toilets imprints ritualized authority on Dalit bodies although the whole social order would collapse without sanitation and hygiene.

The novel demonstrates that if knowledge on toilet and sewer technology would have developed instead of being forgotten then the caste system could never have firmly fixed itself in roots of tradition. Towards the end, Bakha wants to free himself from the clutches of the caste system either by becoming a follower of Mahatma Gandhi or by becoming a Christian. He then feels that Gandhiji’s philosophy would not help him in solving his problem and he also does not want to escape from his original Dalit self and become another victim of conversion tactics. So, he waits for the flush system to come to his village as he has heard that it is already being used by the elite classes in cities. In the following words from the novel:

When the sweepers change their profession, they will no longer remain Untouchables. And they can do that soon, for the first thing we will do when we accept the machine, will be to introduce the machine which clears dung without anyone having to handle it—the flush system. Then the sweepers can be free from the stigma of untouchability and assume the dignity of status that is their right as useful members of a casteless and classless society.' (126-127)

Hence Mulk Raj Anand, a humanitarian, through the flush system to be used in toilets, presents a unique vision of futuristic India on the brink of development and change. He puts forth the idea that the flush system would make life easy for people regarded as untouchables during his era and this advancement in toilet technology would make life easy for future sanitation workers. It also meant giving them back their dignity and treating them as human beings. The

flush system, according to him, would contribute in a big way in creating a casteless and classless society. Thus, according to Mulk Raj Anand, caste ideology can be dismantled through modern flush techniques.

The novel aligns with the history of the toilet as it highlights the problem of unhygienic sanitary practices involved even in closed defecation due to the absence of a proper drainage system in the village. The difference between the toilet and drainage system during the Indus Valley civilization and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century can be studied through the novel. It speaks aloud about the lost reservoir of ancient Indian knowledge. Apart from this, the novel examines the colonizers' strategy of othering and subversion tactics by creating a negative image of Indians, who, according to the Britishers in the novel, were black men relieving themselves on the ground. Their prejudices towards Indians also raises questions on the capabilities of Indians who were great forebearers of ancient knowledge.

Although the story line of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is completely different from the film *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*, they are still connected by threads of the toilet narrative. It also shows that the collective efforts of Cinema and Literature can revolutionize human thinking. Therefore, an analysis of the movie is necessary to find out if Indian society has progressed in today's era and changed the toilet story.

To begin with, the film *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* presents the sociological issue of women's rights to privacy and sanitation during bowel movements. The movie is set in Nandgaon, an imaginary village in Uttar Pradesh. The opening scene starts with a group of women walking a long distance to reach a field in the dark much before sunrise just to relieve themselves. This also implies that they had nowhere to go during daytime if they suffered from a stomach upset or in case of an emergency which is a gross violation of human rights.



The hardships faced by the women in the village goes unnoticed as the real issue is that the people of the village, even women, hardly regard it as a problem. In fact, the film demonstrates that women have conditioned themselves to subconscious suffering for ages. Women have always been flagbearers of patriarchal ideology. These women, as pointed out, take immense pride in pampering male-ego, acting as negotiators and enforcing patriarchal rules on other women. It implies that Cultural grounding since childhood has resulted in internalization of patriarchal ideology. They can be understood as Misogynist matriarchs actively involved in a “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti). It meant assisting men in continuing with the legacy of torturing other women in exchange for ‘shared patriarchal power’. While Jaya makes an attempt to break her silence and fight for her toilet rights, the women of the village humiliate her and declare openly that they have no issue in visiting the fields for excretory purposes. Also, Jaya has to face the oppressive ‘female gaze’ for not adhering by the patriarchal norms of ‘defecating in the open fields’.

It is common knowledge that women who experienced mental/physical torture at the hands of men are subordinate in the binary of male/ female and oppressor/ oppressed. However, the need to dominate other women and negotiate boundaries of power leads them to strategically shift their position from ‘oppressed’ to ‘oppressor’ and create such a binary that operates within the purview of female relationships. The despotic women/ Rebellious woman dichotomy is the new binary formed to safeguard male interests. Towards, the end of the movie, the dynamics change and even the despotic women stage a rebellion and they decide to fight for their basic toilet rights.

The movie also critiques shallow standards of masculinity for compromising on female dignity and persuading them to move away from the peripheries of safety in the name of tradition. In the following lines:

“History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchy they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other.” (Beauvoir 159)

Thus, according to these lines, the harsh life of excreting in the darkness in the desolate fields was a cultural decree designed to control and subjugate women’s bodies. She, being the ‘Other’ had to suffer in silence and her ‘urge’ to answer the call of nature was never looked at as a crisis to be dealt with immediately. The patriarchal code of open defecation was set to keep women in their place and deny them autonomy and independence. To men, going to open fields for defecation translated to holding on to the reins of culture.

The village elder in the film, therefore, quotes a small verse from the Manusmriti according to which people must evacuate their bowels far away from human habitat. He tries to resist social change by using an ancient text to validate masculine control over women’s bodies. However, Keshav (Akshay Kumar) says that he is just giving half- information to misguide the people ignorant about the shlokas in Sanskrit or verses from religious texts. He exposes the hypocrisy of the village elders and the people gathered there by letting them know that the man had skipped the next page which mentioned that religion prohibits people from defecating/ cleaning oneself near a river as it is regarded as a curse; so it meant that using a toilet does not anger the gods. He challenges the age- old beliefs of the orthodox men who send the women with their heads and faces covered in ghonghats and veils and then leave them with no choice but to open up and defecate in full public visibility. He also promotes good sanitation and hygiene practices by telling them about the way toilets could change their life.

The film depicts life in rural India as it was inspired by the true story of a bride from Madhya Pradesh, Anita Narre, who left her husband’s home as it had no toilet after which sparked



endless debates on sanitation and hygiene and later on forced government authorities to sanction toilets and sewer systems in rural areas . In the movie, the divorce proceedings are halted as files move quickly to grant permission to build public toilets in Nandgaon village. Thus, the real-life Anita Narre and fictional character of Jaya represent women who have to summon their courage and make a heroic attempt to liberate themselves from the established norms of patriarchy.

Thus, the history of the Indus Valley Civilization shows that we never tried to dig into India's glorious past and so ancient Indian Knowledge laid buried in its ruins. Further, the novel *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, justifies that the caste discrimination increased with time because Indians did not improvise on Indus valley and Harrapan toilet technology but they abandoned this vast reservoir of ancient knowledge for religious scriptures that they did not understand completely. Lastly, the movie *Toilet: Ek prem Katha* highlights that a tech- savvy village in today's world still adheres to irrational ideas and misinterprets religious texts to validate patriarchy, unlike the more progressive Indus Valley Civilization.

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