

Swacch Narayani, the Goddess of Cleanliness: The Creation of a Goddess as an Organisational Intervention

Abstract

This paper describes a case study into an NGO (non-governmental organisation) in India which has invented a goddess in order to effect transformations in many dimensions including personal, political, societal and symbolic. Based on primary evidence gained through participation and interviews, and secondary evidence from articles written by the organisation's founder, the paper describes the background to the goddess's creation and the desired transformations and explores some of the ways in which the goddess, through the ambiguity of her symbolism, creates a space for resistance.

My interest

My interest in the goddess came from attending a lecture given in London by Madhu Kishwar, the founder and editor of the journal *Manushi*¹ who was talking about a programme of work that the organisation was involved in with street traders in Delhi. Amongst other, more conventional NGO interventions (such as micro credit and self help groups) Manushi, so she said, had invented a goddess, *Swacch Narayani*², the goddess of cleanliness.

In brief, the traders were experiencing continual harassment from the police and municipal officials, who justified their behaviour by saying that the traders were dirty, ill disciplined and the local residents regularly made complaints. Manushi's initial response was that if the police allowed the traders to trade in peace, without the constant fear of having their goods confiscated, that they would be self disciplined and maintain their pitches in good order. However, they found that this wasn't always the case and that although the traders were willing to contribute to the cost of employing a cleaner they were not always willing to keep their pitches clean in between visits from the sweeper. Manushi therefore addressed itself to the following questions:

How could street traders be accommodated into public spaces without bringing chaos and dirt?

How could the street traders be motivated not to live up to their own (and others) stereotypes of them as dirty and disorderly?

'The idea of the *jhadu pooja*³ was to drive home the message that ensuring cleanliness and hygiene of their immediate, physical environment are sacred duties of every citizen, that this task should not be looked upon with disdain and handed

¹ Manushi is the name of both the journal and the organisation. In this paper I use italics to refer to the journal and straight type to refer to the organisation.

² *Swacch* is a Hindi word (of Sanskrit derivation) roughly translatable as 'clean' or 'cleanliness' but carrying with it connotations of purity.

³ *Jhadu* is the Hindi word for broom and *pooja* (sometimes spelled *puja*) denotes a ceremony or ritual of worship..

over to lowly paid sweepers who are treated as untouchables for performing this vital service for society.’ (Kishwar, 2001 p5)

I was captivated by this brief story. At the time I was four months into a new job, teaching *Managing Diversity* primarily to students of human resource management. On the day of the lecture I had just been reminded by one of my students of a truism I used to hear a lot when I was working as a manager, and often used by the diversity industry (although thankfully less by academics) that ‘you can change behaviour but not attitudes’. I have always found this a profoundly depressing thought (and, interestingly, one that doesn’t seem to bother the marketing and advertising industries) and also symptomatic of the ‘reductionist view of diversity’ (Bannerjee and Linstead, 2001 p702). But here was an organisation aiming to influence behaviour *by* challenging attitudes, and challenging them at the deepest level of Schein’s ‘basic assumptions’ that of underlying, unconscious beliefs (Schein, 1991). Kishwar said ‘how to inculcate respect for cleaning when it is associated with low caste activity? The vendors would pay for cleaners but wouldn’t pick up the broom themselves, so how to make the broom sacred?’ (Kishwar, 2004b).

In addition to the desire to problematise diversity in my teaching the story of Swacch Narayani also appealed to two longstanding interests of mine. One is the voluntary sector in which I have worked and also researched (Schwabenland, 2001, 2006) both in the UK and in India. Secondly, I am very interested in the symbolic dimension of activism and organising and here was a story about an organisational intervention that, although only a part of a broader programme of work, represented a deliberate attempt to harness the power of the imagination for organisational ends.

The story of Swacch Narayani

Manushi is best known for the magazine of the same name, published regularly since 1979 which describes itself as ‘a journal about women and society’. *Manushi*’s founder, editor and publisher is Madhu Kishwar, a well know social activist who has written widely on many issues critical to women’s empowerment (Kishwar, 1998, 1999).

In recent years Manushi has also taken on direct action resulting from issues identified by readers or as a result of journalistic investigations and research. The programme of work with the street traders originated in an exploration into the continuing impoverishment and harassment of the traders, largely as a result of the systematic extortion, harassment, confiscation of goods and enforced removal regularly carried out by the police. Street traders are also forced to pay large bribes to corrupt officials to ensure their ‘protection’ regardless of whether or not they have a legal license to trade (which very few do, as the licensing system itself is arcane and ill suited to the needs of Delhi’s very rapidly expanding population (Kishwar, 2002, 2003).

Example of income lost in bribes:

Income for a *chole bathure*⁴ vender: Rs. 5 per plate
Average working hours: 18 per day

Bribes payable per month:

Police	Rs. 1,000
MCD ⁵ Health Inspector	Rs. 400
MCD Inspector	Rs. 200
Other officials	Rs. 100
MCD sweeper	Rs. 60

TOTAL Rs. 1,760 (source: Manushi, 2001 p11)

Therefore, traders are kept in a state of permanent insecurity and poverty regardless of how profitable their goods may be or how necessary they are to the local economy (as most of the traders trade in food; vegetables, spices, fish).

Manushi's response has been primarily at the political level; organising mass demonstrations and systematic lobbying. Their efforts have borne some fruit; a change in the legislation that governs the licensing system (although not, as yet, implemented) and the opportunity to work with a group of street traders in Seva Nagar, a street market located in a primarily middle class, residential area, to create a 'model market' as a demonstration of the traders' ability to be self managing, self disciplined and a valuable part of the local economy.

Cleanliness is central to the success of the demonstration project. Kishwar writes that the municipal authorities justify their continual harassment by saying that the 'vendors create urban chaos and squalor' and that 'if hawkers are given even a slight measure of security they will start encroaching more and more on public space' (Kishwar, 2001 p4). Yet Manushi has collected evidence that suggests that the corruption of the police is itself a highly significant factor in the lack of discipline, in that 'those who act as their [the polices's] touts refuse to submit themselves to market discipline' (Kishwar, 2001 p4). So, the issues of corruption and cleanliness, both physical and attitudinal, are interlinked.

In response, in 2001 Manushi began to develop a 'campaign for cleansing governance'. One aspect of this involved putting a clean, new broom on the table where the statues of Ganesh, Saraswati and Durga⁶ were set out for the regular *pooja* ceremonies, thus implying that the broom was worthy of the same reverence as the other gods and goddesses. By 2004 the ceremony to sacralise the broom had evolved with the 'birth' of Swacch Narayani.

Funding has now been obtained from the municipal corporation to build a new market infrastructure with permanent stalls, electricity and running water – and a space in each stall for a broom. In September, 2004 the building of the new market began, inaugurated by a ceremony which I attended. Part of the building plans include a temple of Swacch Narayani.

⁴ A Northern Indian dish consisting of chick peas in a spicy sauce and a large, deep fried bread.

⁵ Municipal Corporation of Delhi

⁶ Three very popular members of the Hindu pantheon.

In this paper I am going to explore three aspects of this case study; the significance of creating a deity and the appeal to the sacred, the significance of a female deity and her functioning as a symbolic representation of multi-levelled organisational transformation and change.

Why a deity?

While such an appeal to the sacred is somewhat unusual Kishwar comments that 'India is inventing new gods and goddesses every day (Kishwar, 2004b). Nandy also says:

'New gods and goddesses are regularly born in South Asia. Despite their theoretical immortality they also die frequently. They die not of illness or accidents but out of forgetfulness or deliberate erasure.' (Nandy, 2002 p153)

Two often cited examples of recently arrived deities are Jai Santoshti Ma who is generally regarded as owing her conception to Bollywood cinema (Kishwar, 2004b and Das, cited in Nandy, 2002, although note that there are conflicting views about her origins) and Bharat Mata, invented by the freedom movement (Kishwar, 2004b). These are distinct, of course, from mortals who achieve saintly, or god-like status.

So, if unusual, inventing a deity is not wholly without precedent. It is important however to ask whether it is a particularly prudent thing to do in the context of continuing outbursts of communal violence. Isn't an appeal to the sacred a somewhat risky proposition? For example, Agnes (cited in Gedalof, 1999 and Chaudhuri 2004) comments on the 'bitter irony' for Indian feminists who have appealed to Hindu iconography as a means of conceptualising a non-Western feminism, that Hindu women militants 'have seized on these appropriations when attacking Muslims' (Uma Bharti helping to tear down the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya is a good example). Chaudhuri (2004) locates this dilemma within the problematic of defining the indigenous in a plural society.

Nandy argues that the dimension of religion cannot be ignored and suggests that secularism itself is a Western import incompatible with the 'somewhat fluid definitions of self with which many South Asian cultures live' (Nandy, 2002 p65). He distinguishes between two understandings of secularism; one, which establishes a clear boundary between the public and the private spheres (maintaining that religion belongs firmly in the private sphere) and a different formulation of secularism which believes that the public sphere must allow for continuous dialogue amongst religious traditions and between the religious and the non-religious. This latter understanding, he argues, is 'more compatible with the meaning a majority of Indians ... have given to the word "secularism"' (Nandy, 2002 p69) while India's westernized, educated elites have preferred the former understanding.

Furthermore, not only is secularism, in the first sense especially, a Western import, Nandy argues that it's usefulness is breaking down, and not only in India. Recent examples in the UK would include the Birmingham Repertory Theatre's decision to cancel the play *Behzti* written by a Sikh playwright, following protests from many members of the West Midlands Sikh community and the protests from some Christian

groups at the BBC's screening of *Jerry Springer. The Opera*. While one might argue that both of these examples represent an intrusion of the religious into the public sphere, the continuing controversy over the UK government's intention to create new legislation banning the incitement to religious hatred shows how contested is this terrain.

Nandy points out that:

'The modern nation state has no means of ensuring that the ideology of secularism, development and nationalism themselves do not begin to act as faiths intolerant of other faiths.' (Nandy, 2002 p75)

Nandy also argues that the attribution of religious motives to all instances of communal violence requires more careful analysis. He cites statistics from a Government of India report into violence during the period of 1961-1970 'show [ing] that a majority of riots during the period were triggered not by religious but secular conflicts' (Nandy, 2002 p92) and while the level of violence has increased substantially in recent years we should still be careful of adopting too ready explanations that ignore the role of politicians in appropriating those conflicts for their own purposes (and in the UK by characterising the tensions in Northern Ireland as being 'about' religious conflict may have the effect of obscuring other issues such as the inequity of unemployment and poverty amongst the two communities).

Nandy's argument is that we cannot afford not to engage with religion. Many feminists (and people such as Kishwar who do not describe themselves as feminist) have similarly argued that Indian women cannot simply ignore or banish oppressive traditional role models such as Sita, often regarded as the archetypal submissive woman, but instead, engage in reinterpreting those stories in ways that emphasise their strong, positive aspects (Schwabenland, 2001, Kishwar, 2004b).

Bannerjee and Linstead, in their article exploring the underlying tensions and inequities of 'globalization' discuss the possibility of 'reimagining the meaning and nature of local relationships, the democratization of local relating along with forms of local governance (Bannerjee and Linstead, 2001 p715). Many of these local relationships may involve understandings of the role of religion and of the sacred that challenge our Western views about the intrinsic importance of a strict separation of the religious and public realms.

They may also challenge the perception of impermeable boundaries between different religious traditions. Nandy gives many such local examples, not merely of peaceful coexistence but of profoundly blurred boundaries, such as the Meos, devout Muslims who trace their ancestry to the Mahabharatic clans. Another example is that of Madhobi Ma, a Tantic saint whose spiritual lineage includes Muslim saints as well as representatives of profoundly different Hindu traditions (Khanna, 2002). Such examples demonstrate the possibility of co-existence predicated on some basis other than the strict privatisation of religion on the one hand and violent intolerance on the other.

Ahmed also argues that religion ‘is increasingly – and frequently seriously – impinging on the lives of men and women in a manner the world few would have imagined in the closing decades of the twentieth century’ (Ahmed, 2002 p3). She suggests that in the South much of the current religious revival can be understood as a resistance to the failure of the state on the one hand and the increasing threats to cultural identity posed by the homogenising tendencies of globalization. She further argues ‘for add[ing] to the globally emergent narratives of women and spirituality and thus to bolster the range of alternatives to fundamentalism everywhere (Ahmed, 2002 p5).

In Seva Nagar Kishwar estimates that around 10% of the traders are Muslim. (She told me a long story about an instance of recent police harassment of four fish vendors, all Muslim). But Manushi is clear that ‘*this Hindu Muslim thing* [communal tensions and violence] *we will not allow*’. The two, most active leading members of the market are Muslim. I asked one of them how he felt about participating in Swacch Narayani’s worship ceremonies. His response was that for him ‘this was no problem because of cleanliness is so important’. He may have been saying what he thought I wanted to hear but it is at least equally likely that he meant it and that the strict divisions between Hindu and Muslim value systems are not always experienced as such rigid polarities at a local level.

Kishwar says that her engagement with religion as social activism came from the realisation that ‘you can’t be effective without respect for peoples’ values and behaviour which makes them do great things. Otherwise the intervention is not egalitarian’ (Kishwar, 2004a). So the direct appeal to the sacred as an organisational intervention has to be understood within this context.

Why a goddess?

CS: Did you ever think about having a god of cleanliness rather than a goddess?

MK: No, not at all, we did not think about that at all. Because the woman is so strong...

CS: Why not Kali?⁷

MK: ... because there is also the compassionate part and Kali she is frightening... you don’t need to go that far. And people should never forget that at the heart of it is compassion. It’s not anger. And it’s not just rage... that does too much damage.

Although to my Western perspective the idea of a male god of cleanliness is quite attractive, Swacch Narayani would have been a most unlikely god. Sunder Rajan (2004) notes that while there are different views about whether the many goddesses are distinct, separate deities or all aspects of one Great Goddess, Pintchman says:

‘...despite this diversity there are nonetheless discernable patterns underlying many of the disparate elements. On the most abstract level the Great Goddess is identified

⁷ Kali is a goddess who is often depicted with a necklace of skulls around her neck. She drinks blood and animal sacrifices are still made in her name. She is, however, also much loved and is worshipped for representing the individual’s victory over the material world and resulting spiritual growth.

with principles that are impersonal and cosmic, transcending all particularities. In short she is represented as both materiality... *prakrti* and as a principle of energy... *sakti*.' (Pintchman, 1994 p2)⁸

The Goddess, therefore, represents the creation of the material world (creative energy, *sakti*, the power to create, *prakrti*, undifferentiated matter from which all materiality derives). Not only is it the Goddess who as *sakti* makes creation possible, but 'it is the goddess who, in her capacity as *prakrti* / *maya* essentially is creation. Since the manifest world of differentiated forms evolve from the unmanifest, undifferentiated *prakrti* who is the Goddess, the world is essentially her embodiment.' (Pintchman, 1994 p199)

Therefore, it is the Goddess who is responsible for making order out of chaos. She is the guardian of an ordered world – she *is* order.

This is very relevant, because I was forceably impressed by the many references Kishwar makes to the importance of order and discipline in the market. Indeed, while Swacch Narayani is oftener referred to as the goddess of the broom (creative energy) and cleanliness (order) she is also the goddess of self discipline – the power of the individual as a member of a group to create order and withstand chaos. This emphasis on order and discipline permeates most of the article Kishwar has written about Seva Nagar. For example,

'The chaos in urban markets is due to the fact that the local police and their touts do not allow market discipline to emerge through self regulation'. (Kishwar, 2001 p4)

So, is Swacch Narayani simply carrying on the tradition of all goddesses as the representation of divine and material order or is she also a bit subversive? Does Swacch Narayani represent order in terms of the status quo or does she resist? Is she a bit of a radical at heart?

There are at least two aspects of Swacch Narayani's role that seem to me to be, at the very least, ambiguous.

Firstly, she is there to motivate the traders who are perceived to 'create urban chaos and squalor':

*... the entire public opinion is built on the prejudice that it is the vendors that are dirty, chaotic, filthy, stupid people and vermin who should be removed.*⁹

However, in her capacity as the symbol of cleanliness in governance, Swacch Narayani also exposes the paradox that it is the very public institutions that are entrusted with the role of maintaining order and discipline on behalf of society as a whole, that are actually sites of disorder and chaos.

⁸ I noticed that Madhu Kishwar has a copy of Pintchman's book, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition* but I didn't ask if she had read it.

⁹ The quotes I have taken from my interviews are in italics.

The paradox is further deepened when Kishwar describes the complex systems of bribery and corruption in terms of an alternative, almost an ‘anti-system’ or ‘anti-order’.

And from top to bottom everyone is getting their cut. So it's not even as if, if you complained to the higher-ups and said look, they are taking bribes from us, they are not going to be sympathetic because if the commissioner of police himself is taking bribes....

It's also from the bottom up. So every station house officer has to send a certain percentage of his extra legal income to the higher officials. And very often, for example, you find that the wives of these senior officers will come with tow policemen in the government police car to pick up anything they like for free. Or the beat constable will come and say ‘everybody cough up, 500 rupees each, we have to buy a new air conditioner for the deputy commissioner's house of whatever. This happens.

So here we have a contrast between the traders, seen as creating chaos but also striving to create order, and the public institutions of order which create chaos and are internally organised by a shadow system of pseudo, and corrupted order. Even in her least ambiguous role, that of representing cleanliness, Swacch Narayani is a challenging and uncomfortable figure.

The second area of ambiguity concerns her role in the maintenance / destabilizing of the social order of caste. The Goddess, by virtue of her female identity is seen (as are earthly women) as the guardian of caste, not only because of her creative / reproductive power but because only a woman can guarantee the paternity of her children and the purity of the genetic lineage (caste being transmitted through the bloodline). So, the role of maintaining the social order of caste belongs to women and to female deities.

However, Swacch Narayani's role here is even more complex in that she represents the sacralising of the performance of cleaning.

‘How to inculcate respect for cleaning when it is associates with low caste activity?’
(Kishwar, 2004c)

So, does Swacch Narayani, guard the social order or does she challenge and subvert it? Swacch Narayani is clearly an ambiguous goddess.¹⁰ She may be a very young goddess but she is easily as complex a character as any more established deity.

Swacch Narayani as a symbol of multi- dimensional transformation

It is clear from the previous discussion on the role of order and cleanliness in relation to governance and to caste that Swacch Narayani's aspirations stretch far beyond her immediate physical environment. She is a very ambitious goddess.

¹⁰ Pintchman (1994) says that all goddesses are inherently ambiguous because their powers of creation and materiality are each seen as holding both positive and negative potentiality. Creation can be destructive; the material world is that which keeps us earthbound, ensnared in *maya*, illusion.

She also has an illustrious pedigree. Swacch Narayani ‘incorporates the qualities of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, Durga, the warrior goddess who restores justice and destroys evil and Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom and learning’ (Kishwar, 2004 p10). She is single: ‘spouse goddesses are benign but single goddesses are much more scary and can wreak vengeance... a space for female rage..’ (Kishwar, 2004a)

Swacch Narayani also has ten hands. The objects she holds have varied a little during her development – she aquired a video camera in April, 2004 – and are the results of on-going discussions between members of Manushi.

Firstly, she carries the **broom**, to symbolise respect for the cleanliness of the physical environment and to cleanse government of corruption. Her most recent acquisition is the **video camera** – to symbolise the successes in lobbying and campaigning that Manushi has had as a result of filming atrocities carried out against the traders. Her **conch shell** also symbolises purity, transparency and self government.

The remaining hands hold symbols which reinforce her lineage and relatedness to the other goddesses. Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and prosperity and for her Swacch Narayani has **money pouring from her palm**, symbolising hope that all citizens will be able to earn an dignified livelihood without fear, harassment and extortion and she carries **a sheaf of barley**, symbolising the multiplication of wealth. Saraswati is the goddess of wisdom and learning. Swacch Narayani holds a **lamp** to dispel darkness (both physical and also the darkness of ignorance and bring hope and a **pen and account book** – symbols of the importance of learning and gathering information and of honesty in accounting and financial transactions.

Finally, for Durga, the warrior goddess, Swacch Narayani holds **a set of scales**, the symbol of law and justice (and, of course, necessary day to day objects for the vendors, who are reminded of the need to be honest themselves in their dealing with customers...) and the *sudarshan chakra* – Vishnu’s weapon for defeating evil doers.

This is the most up to date list of Swacch Narayani’s possessions (Kishwar, 2004a) but when I visited in September, 2004 I was told that she also held a clock, and there was a clock on the table that held the idols for the inauguration *pooja* alongside the broom.

CS: And the clock?

MK: Clock is ... move with times. Don’t get stuck in old ways and habits. Old mindset. And it’s both a symbol, message for government, a well as for them [the traders] to say you don’t grovel like you were slaves in some feudal estate. Stand up because you’re living in a day and age when certain rights should be yours, by right. So clock for that.

This is a fascinating example of metaphorical, associative thinking. Metaphorical thinking allows the possibility of holding many dimensions of meaning in balance. The clock, as it is imagined by Kishwar, is one such example. Ahmed, writing from a postcolonialist perspective, says that it is ‘the level of the imagination that has to be critically reclaimed and decolonized’ (Ahmed, 2002 p22).

Swacch Narayani makes possible the imagining of change on many levels at once. These are some of the different dimensions of change that she represents:

Individual public¹¹ behaviour

At the most basic level the goddess is intended to motivate the vendors to keep their pitches clean and run the market in a self disciplined way. Although it is very early days there is some evidence that this is indeed happening. All of the traders I interviewed said that the market was cleaner and better maintained since Manushi became involved.

Individual private behaviour

Swacch Narayani also represents the sacralising of cleaning and also the importance of cleanliness in thought. I asked two women if their husbands' increased self respect and respect for the role of cleaning had yet translated itself into helping with domestic work at home- perhaps a wishful and Western preoccupation! Although they said no, Kishwar did comment on the reduction in sexist and abusive language in the market and both women said that the men 'behaved better' than before (although they were not very specific).

The construction of self and group identity

Swacch Manushi seeks to transform the traders' sense of self worth and group identity through demonstrating to themselves and each other that they can run their market effectively.

Kishwar gave this example of increasing autonomy amongst the vendors:

Slowly they stopped [paying bribes] on their own, without, you see that's why the police, because now they can stand up and say no, we won't give you a bribe. And I have not had to say that. So, clearly some strength. With MC [municipal corporation] over, totally over. The municipal authorities, they are not giving them any money at all. I didn't have to say it. This they could do once they had a sense of security.

And awareness of the success of the market is spreading:

...today there were people from three other markets, they just heard word of mouth that this was happening, [and requested us] so please come and do the same. Every day I have people lined up or phone and say we want to be part of this too.

Political change

Swacch Narayani is the goddess of cleanliness in governance. I discussed the market with an official from the Municipal Corporation at the inauguration ceremony and he said that Seva Nagar was the most orderly market in the area. However, while Manushi has had some successes at a political level the campaign for cleansing governance has set itself an ambitious task. As the above quote demonstrates the traders have gained the confidence to refuse to pay bribes to the local authorities and to the police. This has, however, not been without consequences as they are clearly

¹¹ I am aware that the distinction between 'public' and 'private' is itself a very complex subject (see the fascinating article by Chakrabarty 2002) however, I do think there is an interesting issue here about whether or not the increased respect for cleaning and the status of those who do the cleaning carries into the domestic sphere.

disturbing the local economic ecology. Kishwar told me a story about a recent episode where the fish vendors were raided.

Sometimes the reason given for harassing the fish vendors is that their produce is not clean.

You see the fish vendors are harassed one hell of a lot. Because they are always blaming them for this, that and the other. So they arrested four vendors, all of them Muslim, and took their weights and measures and took part of the fish. And even the MCD time when they took... all of the MCD employees distributed half of the fish. And they were able to get only half of the fish released. Half they distributed and gobbled up. So it's so unhygienic to sell why the hell are you eating that fish.

However, on this occasion when Kishwar went to the police station and asked why the traders had been arrested she was told:

See you know I have brought them here because they have stopped paying [bribes]. They have got so much encouragement from you that now they say to our face we won't pay. And that's why I brought them here. So I said to him, well you don't expect me to tell them to start paying you bribes? I mean that is not my job. He says, yeah, but you see it is not just for myself, you have to understand, I have to give it to the higher ups too. And my job is at stake if I stop delivering their dies up here. So you have to help means well because you help everyone who's in trouble and this is going to put me in trouble. So I said, Look, I can't, under any circumstances advise them to pay you bribes, however what I am surely willing to do is this. You enter into some kind of a contract with us, formal informal that you will perform certain services.

The campaign has a little further to go. One of Spivak's (1989) early challenges to the subaltern studies group about their tendency to apply the term 'subaltern' as a relative rather than an absolutist term denoting those who are without the power to speak to and for themselves – but in this example it seems to me that there are many subalterns.

Societal change

Swachh Narayani represents prosperity and wealth creation through her stalk of barley. Kishwar makes the point that the street traders play an essential role in the local economy, generating income for themselves and providing good, locally grown, cheap produce to local residents. She also locates this within the context of the rapid increase in migration from the rural areas to the urban centres. Within this context the importance of street markets assumes even greater significance. When the markets are cleared and the traders' goods confiscated the vendors are deprived of their income, the local residents of good, cheap food and the local growers of outlets for selling their produce. Several of the traders I spoke told me about a six month period of great hardship following one of these raids. The resulting rupture in the pattern of mutual interdependence is to no-one's advantage.

Manushi hopes to extent the model to other areas of Delhi should the demonstration market prove a success.

Cultural change

Kishwar writes: ‘since the rest of society looks down on the task of cleaning the sweepers do not respect their occupation. This is an important reason why there is so much filth and utter disregard for sanitary health in India’ (Kishwar, 2001 p5). As discussed earlier, Swacch Narayani is an icon of change at the level of traditional conceptualisations of caste.

Conceptual change

The figure of Swacch Narayani with her ten arms and ten symbols allows for all these aspirations (and probably many more) to be consciously available at the same time.

CS: Do you think that when people see all these different symbols they automatically comprehend meaning on all these different levels?

MK: Absolutely. Absolutely. I don’t think for ‘lamp’ I need to explain to anyone. Not at all... and I have repeatedly emphasised why our Durga doesn’t have the spear it has to be the jhadu [broom] instead because we don’t want any violence. And they’ve accepted that... but all the others too, you know these are very, folk symbols...

CS: And in terms of the cleanliness you talk about it obviously as being cleanliness on many, many different levels, again do you think that people are responding to that in terms of how they behave on more than just the physical level of keeping up their...

MK: See I can only compare it to where we were when we started. I can tell you their fights were so endemic. Pettyist things were when I started issues to demand, but now I hardly ever have to come and sort out their internal differences. Very few.

The West is sometimes seen as having lost, or diminished our capacity for such rich, metaphorical thinking (Ahmed. 2002). Yet without it, it seems that our aspirations must be limited. Swacch Narayani’s almost boundless ambitions are immense, but India has produced many examples in the past century alone of the capacity of ideas to motivate people to extraordinary achievements. The example of Vinoba Bhave and the Bhoodan Movement (Schwabenland, 2006) in which an estimated four million acres of land were donated by landlords to the landless is only one such example. If our aspirations are limited so, too will be our achievements.

Kishwar says:

‘Movements bring in symbols and put them to creative use and when you know what they lend themselves to you can move mountains with them.’ (Kishwar, 2004b)

Concluding reflections

Mehta said:

‘He [sic] who seeks to understand his own tradition or that of other cultures can only do so from his own, particular standpoint; his “prejudices” not only restrict his vision but enable it. In the act of understanding the vision is both enlarged and corrected, at the same time making the speaker explicitly aware of these prejudices,

which are not just peripheral but constitute the very core of our peculiarity.’
(Mehta, 1992 p249)

Or, as Ricoeur, another hermeneutic philosopher said,

‘...the discovery of the plurality of cultures is never a harmless experience.’
Ricoeur, p278)

Writing as a Western academic (until recently a voluntary sector manager) is a rather perilous business. The twin challenges of orientalism (Said 1978) and the subaltern studies group hover, making me feel I am treading a rather fragile tightrope with the dangers of falling into exoticism (Said) on the one side and elitism (the subaltern studies group) on the other. But the alternative is not to engage at all with the rich, inspiring and profoundly exiting work that is going on in many voluntary organisations in India, of which Manushi is clearly one.

Swacch Narayani is not a goddess who would travel well – my interest in her is not based on her replicability in a western context. She is a local solution to a local problem (or rather, many local problems). Her wider significance, I think, rests in her capacity to represent many dimensions of change and resistance simultaneously. She shares her complexity with other deities. She is not a marketing tool; she is multi-layered, ambiguous, capable of many interpretations and suggestive of many meanings. She is an example of the symbolic at its most profound.

She is not, however, a product of grass roots, subaltern consciousness. Swacch Narayani was invented by the highly educated, highly placed women at Manushi. This is one of the paradoxes, or problematics that many voluntary organisations struggle with – the appropriate ethical response of the ‘concerned citizen’ to social injustice. Many voluntary organisations are founded, and to some extent sustained, not by the people for whom they do their work, but by concerned, often middle class citizens (whose role in these organisations therefore shares some of the ambiguity of elite academics). While it is clearly ethical, and of the utmost importance that people in marginalised positions take power for themselves and are given the space to articulate their own stories, aspirations, and struggles, that doesn’t mean that the rest of us should just leave them to it. Finding ways of using our relatively elite positions to benefit those who have less access to positions of power is a moral imperative for all of us. Mehta’s suggestion is a helpful one here, that we are located in the hermeneutic circles; between the parts and the whole, between explanation and understanding and between awareness of other and awareness of self. The danger is in letting our location within those circles become fixed.

For Swacch Narayani, although she was given birth by elite, educated women, if she is to have any longevity she needs to be given continuing life and meaning not by Manushi staff and volunteers but by the street traders.

For myself, I hope that this is the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship with the goddess. I hope to visit again. Many of her aspirations will take time to bear fruit and, although the traders, with Manushi’s help, have achieved much in a short time, their success at this stage is very fragile.

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