

malba nagar, rubble puri, new delhi

As a child, if I passed the buck, evading chores that I had been asked to do, my aunt would teasingly say '*naukaran agge chaakar te chaakaran agge gulab dasian*', referring to a retinue of imaginary servants and sub-servants who'd magically appear to complete my task. I guess I was not an untypical Indian to count on real or fictitious others to do my dirty work.

POWER OF SEEING

Navtej Johar

A window of a posh car rolls down and out flies some soiled wrapper onto the road, probably with a '*gandi gadi se mujhe sakht nafrat hai*' variety of memsahib sitting inside. Spilling and spreading beyond our territory but not extending to pick up from even under our own noses - is our culture. Because picking up is self-diminishing. It won't be off the mark to say that as Indians our sense of self is defined by who throws (stuff, refuse or weight around) and who picks up after. This self-defining distinction percolates down the hierarchical ladder, disdainfully separating the 'top' league from the one 'below' that shall stoop to clean and pick up after.

Almost every task requires some degree of cleaning up and appropriate disposal of waste material. But most job definitions do not seem to include cleaning up within the contract, making it almost customary not to clean up. A driver cleaning his sahib's car may chuck the rubbish out on to the road. Likewise, workers on our roads do not pick up the debris after their job is done. I've had workers on the road tell me, "*bhai sahib humara kaam kaam karna hai, safain nahin*". We therefore

need to register some basic cultural facts about ourselves: a) that we hold 'working' and 'cleaning' as two separate things and the twain will not meet, and b) that 'work' defines us while 'cleaning-up' diminishes us. We are subliminally taught not to clean and pick up after ourselves. Mounds of *malba*, rubble and rubbish sitting forever on our streets is not due to some insurgent phenomenon, but a direct result of our '*chi-chi ganda*.' Baba don't touch, don't pick' attitude!

When I clean, I want the place to get clean! This is neither an unrealistic nor too lofty an expectation. I also need to know what and how much I am cleaning. Am I cleaning a drawer, a room, a floor, the building, the street, the neighborhood or even the adjoining state? Thus, the space that I set out to clean needs to have a definition, which in turn determines the method in which I will clean. But if the space is one amorphous, boundary-less, crumbling jumble, it robs the worker of ability, skill and incentive to do the job. Most of our urban spaces are ill-defined, and this further compounds to the production and accumulation of rubble. Lack of definition promotes lack of concern and respect for both the space and its ostensible use, the general attitude it may elicit is of *jahan satyanash, wahan sawa satyanash*. When space loses its definition it becomes muted, it loses its articulation and no longer dictates its own rules; it then just becomes a dumping ground where anything goes!

One job being done does not necessarily mean another getting undone. Blurring boundaries is a cultural attitude of apathy and callousness that goes beyond disrespecting spatial demarcations, to not recognising distinction between complete and incomplete work. A new pavement is built,



Malba spilling over brand new drain covers



Leftover malba after job is done



Good material gone bad: A disintegrated pavement



Undoing of a well done job: Dumping malba over a newly made pavement



Our ill-defined spaces

but within weeks it is dumped over with debris pulled out from another portion of the road, resulting in: a) the destruction of a brand new pavement; b) a loss of its definition; and c) and subsequent blurring of boundaries that facilitates encroachment. For example, when material is dumped over a pavement and partly rolls on to the road, in time the left over material turns into rubble, the compressed rubble creates a ramp from the road on to the pavement inviting over-takers to drive over the pavement, leading to chaos and further destruction of the pavement, that is, even more rubble.

Haphazard work or not following a logical sequence from start to finish and stalling the work for long gaps in between automatically lends itself to disorder and the methodical production of *malba*. As part of Power of Seeing Project, we have documented that most street work is done in fits-and-starts and left halfway-done for long periods, during which the material lying unused begins to corrode and slowly convert into rubble. Most of the *malba* that we see is either good material gone bad due to illogical working, or material that has come loose due to shoddy workmanship, or debris and rubbish that was never picked up after the job was 'completed'.

Adding new and ostensibly 'attractive' elements on to the street seem like whimsical impositions without any thought or planning; without either adequate space or system in place. Lately, we have been seeing colourful metal bollards, fancy tiles and drain covers introduced to our city, but unfortunately most of these elements may have to abandon their purpose and give into the forces of encroaching rubble. We need to understand that rubble has a ferocious appetite, plus it is free spirited and uncontained, it thrives on ill-definition as its very nature is to encroach and eat its way through, transforming anything that comes in its way into more rubble.

Thus *malba*, the common denominator of our urban spaces, is not a foreign implant but an extension of who we are. We need to take a hard look at our reality and realise that there are no anonymous *naukars*, *chaakars* or *gulab dasis* ala Mughal-e-Azam, whose destiny in life is to pick up after us. Plus, we also need to examine the culture of methodically detracting dignity out of the act of cleaning. Basically, until we don't make picking up after ourselves a habit, we will continue leaving behind trails of unfinished business and befittingly remain Malba Nagar *nivasis*.



The Power of Seeing is a Studio Abhyas project initiated by dancer and yoga exponent Navtej Johar. It questions the absence of the human body as a central point of reference in urban design, making our cities inconvenient, unsafe and hazardous. Log onto www.abhyastrust.org.



Uncollected rubble resulting in a ramp connecting road to pavement



Anything goes