

Hand-sanitisers and the question of the pure self

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The international hand sanitising industry has received the greatest impetus in recent times, due to the WHO's published Covid 19 protocols. The adoption of this 'new' indispensable cosmetic in handbags, pockets, and car shelves, has however been relatively spontaneous. This spontaneity is related to a long history of understandings of hygiene, public health, and immunity in general. However, material and cultural roots of the sanitisation discourse run deeper. So, varied physical and social principles have come together in the sanitisation market: the liberal importance of self-protection, the relation of the self and community understood as both the preservation of individual health and social responsibility, and even more, self-preservation as *itself* the ideal ethic of healthy communality. Other registers relate to nuanced sensory undercurrents. Thus, there have been studies in the Covid discourse, suggesting how we touch our faces un-self-consciously, several times, and therefore the need for alert hand-behaviour. Touch, is understood in the philosophy of the senses, as the most basic bodily grounding, for a number of different reasons. For instance, its un-self-conscious performance is an insistent basis of self-consciousness. Thus, conscious cleaning of the hands has significant implications for our notions of the aware self. Further, purity has long been a central concern in Indian social life, and the ethic of sanitisation thus also fits seamlessly with an earlier habitus of embodying the social. Most crucially, hands are sensorimotor organs: they are body parts which can sense as well as reach out to the external world. They are the only corporeal element, which can relate to the self as well as others, in equal sensory capacity, most literally. From Aristotle to Immanuel Kant, the Mahabharata to recent neurophysiological studies of the mind, hands have been understood as the most critical tools of rational and ethical social behavior, centrally tied to the brain's evolutionary development, and alongside it, the progress of civilization. Hands, sanitising themselves as part of state directive, as a marker of social responsibility, and their interiorising themselves into cocoons of preservatory morality, away from the domain of touching another, so preservation becoming the best means of sociality, and un-self-conscious touch becoming self-conscious about being only its own object: have very far reaching consequences for the unwrapping of a new normal, a global civilization.

We shall try to think through these questions this semester. Students shall hopefully find easy access to people's narratives of sanitisation, pharmaceutical agencies making and selling sanitisers (and many who have actively volunteered to establish small companies during the pandemic), reading online discussions about this new cosmetic, including potential carcinogenic and other dangers posited by it, etc. Additionally, students would be encouraged to try and relate their thoughts with any line of theoretical imagination that they may find useful. Finally, and hopefully, students may be able to think about themselves, their new everyday, the community around them, the planet we inhabit, and the very corpus tying all this together: our hand-skin, through fresh lens of touchability and untouchability, purity and irresponsibility, health and death, good, clean, global citizenship, and indiscriminate touch.