

## Swachh Bharat Abhiyan: Importance of Re-inventing the Indian Socio-cultural Psyche

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the Swachh Bharat campaign and evaluates its twin objectives of awareness and implementation. It brings to light the resounding initial success achieved by this campaign and the well-formulated set-up from the bottom to top rungs of the administration. The theme of participative governance with a high degree of public engagement is acknowledged. Further, it discusses the socio-cultural aspect of this campaign along with the archaic caste-ridden afflictions this campaign might have to face in order to achieve success in the true sense. It explores the casteist psyche prevalent in society which threatens to manifest as an impediment towards a cleaner India and attempts to throw light on the areas of importance - social, structural and political, which must be taken into account to ensure the continued success of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.

**Keywords:** waste-segregation, social vigilante, casteism, archaic cultural narrative, manual scavenging, open defecation

### Introduction

The idea of Swachhta was advocated by Mahatma Gandhi when he gave a bold statement that “Sanitation is even more important than political freedom”.

From a rational view-point, one cannot entertain any doubt whatsoever that sanitation forms an essential part of Right to Life guaranteed by Article-21 of our Indian Constitution. From time to time, many governments have initiated programmes for cleanliness and sanitation, but seldom has any received as much popularity as the Swachh Bharat campaign. The ruling BJP government deserves praise for creating an environment where sanitation is now openly discussed and analysed on public forums. The direct involvement of the Prime Minister himself, and many other famous personalities, has ensured that the Swachh Bharat campaign catches the interest of masses.

### A Brief Overview of the Statistics

As an awareness campaign, it has succeeded in reaching the remotest of areas in the country. In a short span of 3 years, about 50 million toilets have been constructed in rural India increasing the coverage from 39% to 69% in 2017. Almost 3.8 million have sprung up in the cities and towns, and yet another 1.4 million are presently under construction. As against this, only 300000 toilets were built during the period between 2004 and 2014. So far, 248000 villages in 203 districts have been restricted from open defecation; over one-third of total have eradicated open defecation completely. A record number of 5 states, comprising Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Uttarakhand and Haryana have declared themselves open-defecation-free(ODF) in rural areas and about 1200 other cities and towns.

It is pertinent to note that all open defecation free claims are scrutinized and verified by an independent third party, thus ensuring transparency and presenting an objective review.

### Waste-segregation

The Swachh Bharat campaign has also created awareness about separation of liquid and dry waste. The basic unit of this drive has been chosen as the household itself where separate bins are to be used for wet and dry waste. This will help in making the storage and recycling of waste much more convenient.

This shall further be continued in an institutionalized manner, wherein the existing waste-recycling units will be updated with the latest technology, and made much more effective. In the not-too-distant past, they were commonly nothing more than a dumping ground for all the collective waste. The administration has been busy in ensuring that the local bodies and district level administration are in sync, organizing the waste-segregation campaign, by providing the blue and green waste-baskets, educating the waste-collectors and sanitation-workers, and outlining ways to provide a suitable and safe work-environment to these workers who are the actual backbone of this campaign.

### Social Vigilante

Another aspect of the campaign involves Social Vigilantism targeting those people who still litter in public places and deface public property. This campaign has succeeded in pricking the conscience of masses and sending a strong message that swachhta is not an exclusive responsibility of government, rather is a collective onus on each and every citizen of the country.

Fines and Penalties are being formulated for ensuring that this drive is institutionalized, and the public has been engaged as a vigilante through various social networking sites. The officials are working in tandem with the government’s awareness drive so that this initiation does not remain a mere political campaign but translates into a well-formulated and well-executed administrative plan.

### **Building a cleaner Indian narrative**

In an era where India is making huge strides to lend credibility to its claim of being a global superpower, its progress is continuously marred by images of poor slums dwelling in shadow of giant heaps of ill-managed waste products. On one side, the Indian IT and software industry's services are sought after by the most developed countries of the world and on the other, our country continues to face flak for not fulfilling the sanitation goals as laid out not only in the Millennium Development Goals, but even the latest Sustainable Development Goals, set by UNDP (United Nations Development Programme).

We have a thriving tourism industry and lakhs of tourists from other countries visit India every year, but many of the awe-inspiring tourist spots often end up losing their charm due to lack of efficiency in waste management and low levels of civic sense amongst citizens. Due to this, India's rich cultural ethos is obscured behind the dark cloud of roadside filth and litter.

In such a scenario, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has come as a much-awaited ray of hope for those who believe strongly in the dream of a Developed and Clean India. Matters regarding sanitation, which were earlier swept under the carpet, have now boomeranged into full public scrutiny and its very encouraging to note that the country is witnessing numerous discussions amongst its citizens on ways to make India clean. The engagement of various famous personalities who are now ambassadors of this campaign has ensured the reach of this campaign to the grass-root level.

### **Challenges to actual Implementation**

The initial aim to spread awareness about the campaign has met with resounding success, but it still remains a humungous task to implement it in accordance to its real purpose. It is important to adhere to the social dynamics of the country to strike a harmonious chord with the masses.

Sanitation or Swachhta is just an umbrella term having multiple branches, all of which deserve specialized attention, namely

- Reducing the waste littered on roads and streets by the public,
- The glaring challenge of eradicating open defecation, and
- The miserable plight of the sanitation workers.

### **CASE 1**

Women who use open defecation have twice the odds of molestation and sexual violence than those women who use household toilets. This is a clear indication that in-house toilet infrastructure can provide women with a greater degree of protection against sexual assault. It is imperative for the Indian government to expand their sanitation programs, and confront and tackle the mindset of the rural segment of the population, and go beyond the administrative provision of toilets.

### **The 'Cultural' Dilemma: the reality of our rural mindset**

To lend justification to the practice of open defecation, the orthodox psyche of rural segment quotes excerpts interpreted, or perhaps mis-interpreted, from various ancient texts, which strictly assert that the place of defecation should be away from

the place of residence to keep the germs away from home. So, we have to face an interesting dilemma, that of the orthodox view of cleanliness versus its modern counterpart. And to be clear, if anyone of us thinks that this is the psyche of less than half the population of India which is mostly very poor and uneducated, then he or she is in for a bitter reality shock because open defecation is practiced by a majority of Indian villages. The ground reality is that this practice has absolutely no connection with financial status, caste or literacy-level of a household. It does not matter if one is a Thakur or dalit, rich or poor, male or female; when it comes to the matters of sanitation, open defecation emerges as the clear preferred choice over the use of an in-house toilet. What does this signify?

- To begin with, it rings many a warning bell for the optimistic sanitation targets fixed by the government and its vision documents. If the funding for toilet-construction do not reach grass-root level, no eligible beneficiary would raise any protest or lodge complaints with concerned government departments. These grants are likely to be embezzled or usurped by potentially corrupt employees in the administrative machinery.
- Secondly, it would slow down the government's various National Health Plans also. If open defecation goes on unabated in same manner, it can pose as a major hindrance to the target years fixed for elimination of various contagious diseases in the national health policy such as Kala-azar and Filariasis by 2017, Tuberculosis by 2025, etc.
- Thirdly, open-defecation poses as a major threat to Beti Bachao Beti Padhao programme of government. It is an open fact that we cannot risk any further vulnerability in women-safety than what they already endure while going for open defecation. Majority of the female molestation and rape cases have been seen to occur when they have been caught vulnerable while going to defecate in unsafe places away from the safety of the households. The horrific incident of Badaun where two young girls were raped and hanged to death while they were out to attend nature's call was outrageously not moving enough for people to adopt the use of toilet! So what is the solution?

Clearly the government has to add yet another dimension to the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, which may be called as the "Swachh Soch Abhiyan" because it's the socio-cultural mindset that we are pitted against, and not merely the poverty or illiteracy. The idea is to view this problem from a holistic view-point and not in isolation from the other social realities.

### **CASE 2**

The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, was passed that made it illegal to employ such workers and directed rehabilitation with skill training and alternative jobs. The law itself tacitly admits the difficulty in banning a job that employs lakhs of citizens who would lack alternative work. It specifies tests that should be conducted before workers enter manholes. Passing laws allows the Indian government to argue that it is in line with international standards, but authorities are less interested in ensuring that standards are enforced, he said. A manual scavenger is exposed to toxic gases like methane, nitrogen and

ammonia. The Tata Institute of Social Sciences, an educational and research organisation, found that an average of 20 sewer workers die each month in Mumbai from accidents, suffocation or exposure to toxic gases. There are cases where workers have been carried away by the gushing water. Moreover, 80% of the workers die before they turn 60 because of work-related health problems, the study found.

### **Plight of the Sanitation Workers**

The sanitation workers, who are the basic unit of any cleanliness campaign in India, have been ignored when it comes to the awareness campaign. More attention needs to be paid to their condition and work- environment to evaluate the challenges that need to be tackled or changed for their upliftment. When it comes to sanitation workers, there are two main factors which we need to consider when discussing their upliftment-

- Firstly, the caste and occupation link - For centuries, all sanitation workers have only belonged to the lowest outcaste Strata of society who had been assigned the menial job of cleaning the human excreta and other faecal-matter. Gradually, this has led to institutionalization of manual scavenging in society so much so that it has normalised the employment of manual scavengers on basis of their birth in a certain caste. Such workers invariably take to manual scavenging for survival because they lack alternative means of employment and livelihood. What this has done is that it has lent a perpetual continuum to untouchability, albeit in a disguised form. These are very menial jobs considered to be exclusively for the lowest Strata of society and therefore these are looked down upon by the comparatively higher castes of the society. Thus, it creates a huge communal divide as well and it also leads to a severe shortage of work force for cleanliness jobs in India as there is social stigma attached to it. When it comes to volunteering for taking up jobs of sweeper or Safai Karamchhari, there isn't a very high number of applicants who come seeking this job and those who do are invariably from the lower stratas. Thus, this caste-occupation linkage has to be broken if we are to see any Grass root level success for the Swachh Bharat campaign.
- Sanitation workers endure a very tough time in their workplace environment facing multiple life hazards. In manual scavenging, the work itself is fatal to any human's life because it includes cleaning of manholes by getting into the gutters. Many poisonous gases such as hydrogen-sulphide and methane are trapped inside the manholes, so the workers who are assigned the duty of getting in manholes and cleaning them are risking their lives on daily basis. Constitutionally speaking, "the Right to Life" of these workers needs to be respected which is being increasingly infringed on daily basis. Moreover, there are not many efforts being made for the mechanization of cleaning manholes and pits. They end up using their bare, unprotected hands which makes them prone being infected by various communicable diseases. Their life expectancy is tragically very low as compared to people who are engaged in other clean professions, and therefore, as long as their work-environment will remain entrenched with hazards like these, there will be very few job applicants

seeking the post of cleanliness employee and it will again be a severe problem for already shortening workforce for volunteering for the main cleaning jobs of the Swachh Bharat campaign.

- To add salt to their wound, these workers are surviving on abysmally low amount of wages to make their both ends meet. This is in direct contrast with the Developed nations which pay the highest to those professions that involve the highest risk. While constructing a road, the highest pay is given to the worker who diverts the traffic than those behind him who are engaged in construction, as he or she risks his life and limb being right in front of incoming vehicles.

Hence it goes without saying that all the policies to be framed for furtherance of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan must have at their centre, a clear intention to safeguard the rights of these sanitation workers.

### **Research Methodology**

Present paper is an evaluative analysis of linkages between open-defecation and sexual violence amongst women. Another analysis was the inter-relation between the work-environment of the sanitation workers (safai-karamcharis) and the administrative set-up of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. The influence of a casteist social psyche as an impact factor in this campaign was also analysed.

The most recent data was used from policy documents, surveys and updated results published by Government of India, Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs and Ministry of Drinking Water & Sanitation, and the Swachh Bharat Mission portal. Related case-studies and research briefs by National Institute of Health and other government agencies were also referred to. Authorised reports of manual scavenging cases and sexual assault on women were taken as a reference point to further define the finer points of the analysis.

### **Conclusion**

We must continuously engage in reviewing and researching newer innovative practices which can act as catalysts to the Swachh Bharat scheme and take it towards its desired outcome.

- Mechanization of cleaning-jobs is very important because, by eradicating the direct human-waste contact, it will remove the stigma that is attached with being a sweeper or Safai Karamchhari.
- Modernizing and updating sewerage-lines and investing in research and development of smart techniques of sanitation will lead to efficient waste-management. At the same time, this will reduce the health-hazards and prevent communicable diseases amongst the workers.
- The entry of private sector in an organized way can further push the scale of competition in getting government contracts for waste management which can bring the much-needed professionalism as well as dignity of labour in this field.
- Increased remunerations for sanitation workers can give a big boost to this campaign. The government should recruit officers who have specialised in the knowledge of waste-management and hold professional educational degrees in this field. A fair remuneration will enhance the job status

of a cleanliness worker. Higher salaries can potentially disrupt the caste-occupation linkages in waste management profession as job seekers from all the castes and sections of the society will be interested to join this industry for its monetary incentives.

- Behavioral change is very important if these targets are to be achieved. It is the cultural mindset which needs to be changed in favour of a liberal and progressive march towards higher shores of development. Religious organizations may be roped into the campaign to clarify the masses about the misinterpretations of some religious texts which push people into following outdated practices such as open defecation.
- The maintenance of millions of toilets that have been constructed by the Indian government is also a herculean task. A decisive factor in the future success of this scheme is finding a competent answer to the question of maintenance of these toilets. An innovative idea is the Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) where toilets be constructed by public sector undertakings and later on maintenance is undertaken by a private sector entity. A prime example can be seen in metropolitans like New Delhi where the government has given out the contract for toilet maintenance to Sulabh Pvt. Ltd. which has done a commendable job in maintaining the toilets in capital till many years of their initial construction. At the same time, the company has enjoyed considerably high levels of profit. So there is a good scope for other private companies to compete in this sphere.

These reforms will enhance the strength of skilled workforce in the cleaning department which will ultimately culminate into greater efficiency and profitability in the field of waste management, thereby ensuring that the aim of Swachh Bharat Campaign is continuously reviewed and re-invented in order to make the dream of a Clean India a reality.

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