

GANDHIJI AND SANITATION

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Gandhiji was of the strong opinion that sanitation education should be given from primary school onward. Only three R's were not enough, lessons in manners and sanitation and removal of untouchability were the indispensable preliminaries to the initiation of three R's (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic). Gandhiji firmly believed that sanitation and hygiene was everybody's business.

It is perhaps a rare occurrence in the history of Independent modern India that a Prime Minister has chosen to speak about sanitation in his address to the nation on Independence Day. The fifteenth Prime Minister of India, in his first Independence Day speech on 15 August, 2014, said the following from the ramparts of the Red Fort.

"Brothers and sisters, it will be 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi in 2019... Mahatma Gandhi had cleanliness and sanitation closest to his heart. Whether we resolve not to leave a speck of dirt in our village, city, street, area, school, temple, hospital, and what have you, by 2019 when we celebrate 150th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi? This happens not just with the Government, but with public participation. That's why we have to do it together... Has it ever pained us that our mothers and sisters have to defecate in open? Whether dignity of women is not our collective responsibility? The poor womenfolk of the village wait for the night; until darkness descends, they can't go out to defecate. What bodily torture they must be feeling, how many diseases that act might engender. Can't we just make arrangements for toilets for the dignity of our mothers and sisters? ... you must be getting shocked to hear the Prime Minister speaking of cleanliness and the need to build toilets from the

ramparts of the Red Fort... The poor need respect and it begins with cleanliness. I, therefore, have to launch a 'Clean India' campaign from 2nd October this year and carry it forward in 4 years. I want to make a beginning today itself and that is – all schools in the country should have toilets with separate toilets for girls. Only then our daughters will not be compelled to leave schools midway".¹

In 1990, India also became one of the signatories to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is also a signatory to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 6 of the SDG focuses on **ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all**. Under SDGs, some indicators are modified MDGs and some are new, and India's performance will be monitored on the basis of those indicators. UNICEF's Report **Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation 2014 Update** shows that India made reasonable improvement in sanitation coverage between 1990 and 2012. Urban India had relatively better base in 1990, but rural India's status with respect to sanitation was poor. In 1990, 50 per cent population in urban India had access to improved sanitation facilities and in 2012, 60 per cent had similar access. In rural areas, access to improved sanitation increased from 18 per cent in 1990 to 36 per cent in 2012. Compared to urban India, the performance in rural area was more impressive.

Prime Minister's commitment and announcement about improving the sanitation situation in rural India has borne some fruits. The **Swachhha Status Report 2016** published by National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), of Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation has taken note of the progress at all India level. It is almost a benchmark as the survey was conducted in May-June 2015, about 9 months after the Prime Minister declared the national commitment to make the country Open Defecation Free (ODF). In



this 72nd National Sample Survey, it was found that 45.3 per cent households reported having sanitary toilets and in urban area, the percentage was 88.8. The latest assessment of the status with respect to key sanitation indicators in the country reveals the following.

The rural household toilet coverage has improved to 68 per cent by September 2017. 11.32 crore toilets have already been built in rural India. This is a good progress indeed. Five states are declared completely ODF. 195 districts in the country are ODF and 237,084 villages are declared ODF.² More than one third of India thus, is declared ODF. In the three year period, it is a significant achievement as the programme is in a mission mode. However, it is also understood that having toilet and having access to toilet is not the same thing as using them. Further, while understanding the reasons for not using the toilets, one comes across several problems. More than one-third of rural households in India still do not have usable toilets in their houses. An interesting comparison was made in the recent past between the percentage of population having cell phones and having toilets at home. Percentage of households having a cell phone far exceeded the percentage having a toilet in the house. This reflects people's awareness, understanding and priority to sanitation.

Mahatma Gandhi was the first leader of eminence to have focussed his attention on sanitation and hygiene issue. Till the last days of his life, he continuously drew people's attention to this problem. Most importantly, he worked on the problem and conducted numerous experiments in building toilets, clearing the faecal material scientifically, emancipating the sanitation workers who handled faeces most hazardously and were socially severely discriminated and shunned with untouchability. In order to substantially improve sanitation and hygiene in the country, it is necessary to revisit Mahatma Gandhi's ideas and work.

Mahatma Gandhi's Concerns:

Gandhiji's work on sanitation began in South Africa. He had internalised the need for a high standard of sanitation for any civilised and developed human society. His exposure to England and English settlements in South Africa had convinced him that the West was moving fast and ahead in the area of



sanitation. He told the Indians in South Africa and later in India that the West which had evolved a science of corporate sanitation and hygiene and one thing all in country could and must learn is the science of municipal sanitation. Gandhiji expressed concern on sanitation in public arena till January 29, 1948, a day before he was assassinated. In the draft constitution for the Lok Sevak Sangh that was to replace the Congress, he mentioned the following in the duties of the people's worker.

"He shall educate the village folk in sanitation and hygiene and take all measures for prevention of ill health and disease among them".

Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Gandhiji's Guru in Politics, had asked Gandhiji to travel in the country for one year before embarking on any public action. Gandhiji did not miss the insanitary conditions in trains, ships, holy places and neighbourhoods. Some of his observations are worth revisiting as the situation has not changed very much since last hundred years and more. On 14 March, 1915, while travelling to Rangoon in an overcrowded deck as a passenger, he observed.

What was an apology for a bath room was unbearably dirty, the latrines were stinking sinks. To use the latrine one had to wade through urine and excreta or jump over them... If anything was lacking to complete the picture of stink and filth, the passengers furnished it by their thoughtless habits. They spat where they sat, dirtied the surroundings...³

Visiting Lakshman Jhula, a location near Hardwar, he found that a scenic and beautiful gift

of nature was tainted by human beings visiting the place. He noted.

As at Hardwar, so at Hrishikesh, people dirtied the roads and the fair banks of Ganges. They did not even hesitate to desecrate the sacred water of the Ganges. It filled me with agony to see people performing natural functions on the thoroughfares and river banks...⁴

He had visited Benares (Varanasi) and he observed about Kashi temple and surroundings the following.

I visited the Viswanath Temple last evening and as I was walking through those lanes, these were the thoughts that touched me. If a stranger dropped from above on to this great temple and he had to consider what we as Hindus were, would he not be justified in condemning us? Is not this great temple a reflection of our own character? I speak feelingly as a Hindu. Is it right that the lanes of our sacred temple should be as dirty as they are? The houses round about are built anyhow. The lanes are tortuous and narrow. If even our temples are not models of roominess and cleanliness, what can our self-government be? Shall our temples be abodes of holiness, cleanliness and peace as soon as the English have retired from India, either of their own pleasure or by compulsion, bag and baggage?⁵

Describing a Third Class Railway Compartment environ Gandhiji had said.

We do not know the elementary laws of cleanliness. We spit anywhere on the carriage floor, irrespective of the thought that it is often used as sleeping space. We do not trouble ourselves as to how we use it; the result is indescribable filth in the compartment. The so called better class passengers over-awe their less fortunate brethren. Among them I have seen the student world also. Sometimes they behave no better. They can speak English and they have worn Norfolk Jackets and therefore claim the right to force their way in and command seating accommodation. I have turned the searchlight all over and as you have given me the privilege of speaking to you, I am laying my heart bare. Surely we must set these things right in our progress towards self-government.⁶

He realised that villages were virtual hells. Many still are. Gandhiji, in almost all public gatherings

and civic receptions during first ten years after his return in 1915, brought sanitation related issues in his address. In **Navajivan** and **Young India**, Gandhiji wrote about sanitation frequently. In almost every Congress major convention, he in his speeches touched upon the sanitation issue. For Gandhi insanitation was an evil. In a speech in Calcutta (now Kolkata) on August 25, 1925, talking to the potential village level constructive workers, he told the workers to go to villages with broom-stick, quinine, castor oil and spinning wheel which represented health, sanitation and hygiene, and village industry.

Gandhiji was of the strong opinion that sanitation education should be given from primary school onward. Only three R's were not enough, lessons in manners and sanitation and removal of untouchability were the indispensable preliminaries to the initiation of three R's (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic). Gandhiji firmly believed that sanitation and hygiene was everybody's business. He then told every volunteer and constructive worker to become a scavenger so that the class of manual scavengers was eliminated. He knew that they stood last in the list of the condemned.

Gandhiji: A Sanitation Worker

Gandhiji had become a staunch practitioner in sanitation work. In Phoenix, Ashram and Tolstoy Farm in South Africa, sanitation was set up and managed by all inmates. Many experiments were conducted and human excreta was turned into fertiliser and considered very valuable. Dry latrines were used and every morning a team of inmates would remove the containers and transfer the night soil into bigger container and carried to farm. It was deposited in a pre-fixed spot and left to turn itself into manure. It was then used to as fertiliser for the horticultural crops. Similarly, in India too, the sanitation work in Kochrab, Sabaramati and Sevagram Ashrams was undertaken by all inmates. Gandhiji and the inmates had amply demonstrated that scientific handling of night soil was possible for all and it should be practised. Doing so would also help ending the problem of inhuman conditions forced upon scavenging communities that were then condemned with untouchability.

Gandhiji also felt deeply hurt the way his countrymen treated communities who were condemned to handle filth and human excreta. The feelings had developed even when he was a child and

not as an adult who had understood untouchability. This is evident from an episode when once he told his mother that he had touched an untouchable and on being questioned seriously he would say that he was joking.⁷ Later as an adult, he was to say that untouchability was the most horrendous practice and Gandhiji dedicated his entire life to remove this blot. He had also realised that Indians had over time developed a very unscientific attitude towards sanitation and hygiene. It was this attitude that was responsible to create a class of people who were to handle filth and faeces. This class was then condemned to live outside the main settlement in poverty and destitution and most inhuman physical and mental conditions. When Gandhiji gave call to improve sanitation and hygiene, he also had firm agenda of integrating the condemned communities with all as equals without bias, prejudice and contempt.

Gandhiji carried his concern for curse of untouchability in the country. Removal of untouchability was a personal, social, religious and political agenda for him. Sanitation for him was not limited to having clean and hygienic toilets, streets, and waste disposal, but it extended to integrating the scavenging and other communities that had become untouchable for centuries with the so called sacred mainstream social groups. Liberty and equality for every individual on earth was the most cherished value for Gandhiji. In his view, India would remain insanitary if untouchability was not completely removed. Hence, the tribute to Gandhiji would remain underpaid if we as a society fail to respond comprehensively to do away finally with insanitation and the social sickness of untouchability. Gandhiji had not merely taken an intellectual position on the issue, but he was emotionally committed to it and spent his life in removing this blemish. He was out to sanitise the orthodox mind-set with all embracing love for the untouchables.

Social Innovation and Enterprise

The youth in the country should be reoriented to think about sanitation issue as an opportunity to innovate and become social entrepreneurs having economic implications. Sulabh International is a shining example of innovation and enterprise in sanitation sector. There is also Sanitation and Environment Institute in Sughad, Gandhinagar,

Gujarat. Founders of both were inspired by Gandhiji and impressed by his efforts. However, one or two such institutions are not enough for the country. There is immense scope to turn the sanitation problem in the country into an opportunity. The political will required is that of encouragement and facilitation. The youth of India who take up the work of sanitation should be recognised, helped, paid and lauded. The 2016 Magsaysay Award winner Bezwada Wilson is awarded and recognised for his work on amelioration and resettlement of manual scavengers. According to him, there are still around 200,000 manual scavengers in the country. Youth should come forward and design schemes to wean them away from this inhuman occupation. The work involves two aspects. One is, pressurising, persuading and arranging toilet construction for those households who create this work for manual scavengers. The Gram Panchayats and Municipal bodies in whose jurisdiction manual scavenging is taking place should be duly penalised. Their grants should be made conditional. Second is to skill the scavenging community members and provide alternative vocations. The governments at all levels should come forward with a special scheme to support the willing youth. Sulabh International, Sanitation and environment institute and similar institutions of proven core competency and commitment may become the nodal agencies to undertake the planning, training, and monitoring the scheme.

The problem of open defecation is rampant in rural India. The disposal is considered to be dirty and despicable. The government should recognise treated human excreta as organic manure and provide incentive price support for its acquisition. The village youth should be given skill training to handle the human excreta scientifically and hygienically. This is possible. Then a village level human excreta treatment plants should be supported. The home toilet linked with the two pit latrines also makes them tiny treatment plants and its use should be incentivised. Toilet construction and treating and using scientifically treated human excreta are the modern constructive programme of Gandhiji.

The households in rural and urban India can also be oriented (if necessarily compelled with penal provision) to segregate waste at household unit level. The collection, processing, recycling and

disposal should be a social enterprise for which adequate support and requisite training should be given to youth and they should be oriented to participate. Once youth comes into this work, there will be innovations leading to better handling and disposal. The central premise still is that we should have strong dislike for filth, dirt and insanitation and love and sympathy for the condemned people who do the cleaning and disposal. We have to respond to Gandhiji's call.

There is considerably more to Gandhiji's idea of a Swachh Hindustan. In addition to outer cleanliness, the the *Yugapurusha* Gandhiji wanted to see Hindustan *Swachh* – clean and cleansed, body and soul. He was distressed about the way we lived and maintained our inhabitations. He had an opinion built on his understanding of India's history that one of the main reasons behind Indian communities losing sense of cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation was that during one thousand years of continued aggression of invaders who came in succession turned the communities into subservient and slave like. The civility and culture were severely eroded and sanitation and hygiene was also a casualty.

Education, Extension, and Research

Gujarat Vidyapith, a university founded by Gandhiji in 1920 has revived the efforts to make Bharat Swachh. It is involved in active promotion of getting toilets built and used. Shri Narayan Desai, son of Mahadev Desai and the former Chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapith, while rendering 108th *Gandhikatha*⁸ in January 2012 at village Sadra where Vidyapith has a rural campus gave a call to reinstitute Gandhian Constructive Programme. The teachers and the students from the campus committed that they would promote toilets during and after the *Katha*. Vidyapith has been able to facilitate building of more than 2000 toilets in villages surrounding Sadra⁹. It has been indeed difficult to persuade people to give priority to toilets in the villages even within 20 km of the big cities such as Ahmedabad. These difficulties in changing people's mindset increase further if government functionaries are not very enthusiastic and motivated towards this work. All these factors are responsible for the state of India's toilet building story in the middle of second decade of 21st century.

Vidyapith has also been working on bio-gas. A project that had come to Vidyapith for Bio-Gas promotion in villages eventually evolved into a full

doing and learning programme. Now Vidyapith has microbiology department from undergraduate to Ph.D. The department teachers and students have set up biogas plants on the highway *Dhabas* using food waste, twigs and a dose of cow dung. We must as a society realise that all shit that is around us is food for various organism that help in improving the production of organic material which is food for us! That is eco-system and we need to honour without any arrogance. We need to understand and respect and work on it to improve our life. Needless to add, that Vidyapith is choice university for poor, dalits and tribal students seeking higher education in mother tongue.

Every university in the country should adopt such a programme for sanitation. Universities vying for excellence in ranking in India have to realise that it is more basic work that remains to be done in the country's villages and urban slums and neglected settlements. There is full scope for education, extension and research. There is further scope for enterprise and employment in the sanitation sector. Sanitation and Hygiene education has to be vigorously introduced and practiced is every school of the country. Unfortunately, the teachers and parents, out of ignorance, arrogance and prejudices are reluctant to undertake sanitation and hygiene work at home and at school. We all need schooling. Mere building of toilets alone will not improve the sanitation scene in the country. Our overall mindset towards sanitation needs to change. In addition to clean surroundings, cleansing of body, mind and soul should also be our priority. Gandhiji beckons.

Footnotes

- 1 <http://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/tag/speech/> 18December, 2015
- 2 <http://sbm.gov.in/sbm/> Accessed September 10, 2017
- 3 Gandhi M.K. 1927. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. 1976 Reprint.P 291.
- 4 *Ibid* p 296
- 5 *Ibid* p 212-13
- 6 *Ibid* p 213
- 7 For a full account, interested reader may refer, Pyarelal, 1965, *Mahatma Gandhi Volume – 1*

The Early Phase. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. 1986 reprint, page 217

- 8 There is an Indian tradition of storytelling, where religious texts and mythologies are narrated in huge public gatherings. Bhagvat and Ramayan story rendering are very well-known. Narayan Desai has successfully used the form to take the Gandhi story to people, three hours a day for five days.

- 9 Efforts have been made before the *Gandhi Katha*. Thus in all, Vidyapith has facilitated construction of more than 5000 toilets since 1990s.

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600 Young Professionals as Zila Swachh Bharat Preraks to boost Swachh Bharat

The Tata Trusts, one of the country's leading philanthropic organizations, in collaboration with the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, the coordinating Ministry for Swachh Bharat Mission, has offered to provide 600 Zila Swachh Bharat Preraks (ZSBPs), one in each district of the country, for a period of one year. This partnership between would mark a critical and landmark beginning that would accelerate the progress on the path to an ODF India. This initiative would inspire many more in the corporate sector to intensify their engagement with developmental programmes of the government. Tata Trusts is committed to help combat malnutrition and stunting among India's children and improving public health indicators by eliminating Open Defecation in the country, through such partnerships with the Union and State Governments.

During his "Mann Ki Baat" address on 25th September 2016, the Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, had made an appeal, on behalf of the Swachh Bharat Mission to the corporate world, to sponsor young professionals who would support district administrations across the country in the implementation of Swachh Bharat Mission.

The ZSBPs will be a cadre of young professionals geared to strengthen capacities at the district, and provide them technical and management support. This cadre will be funded and recruited by the Tata Trusts, at no extra cost to the State government or the Ministry. The role of these young ZSBPs will be to support the Collector/DDO/CEO to implement SBM(G) by coordinating the various sanitation-related activities in the district. In addition to the wider benefits of engaging smart minds in the Mission, this will also ensure a structured integration of the youth in the programme and bring in fresh ideas, energy and enthusiasm to the Mission, thereby accelerating progress on the path to an ODF India. This new initiative will provide the necessary support needed at the State and district level. These young professionals being brought into the districts with the programme will be a part of an initiative that has not been tried in the country before, and will have a unique opportunity to make a difference in the progress and development of their country.

Nearly 3 crore individual household toilets have been constructed so far. Since SBM is a programme focused on usage of toilets rather than construction of toilets alone, it is a notable achievement that 67 districts and nearly 1.3 lakh villages of the country have become Open Defecation Free, including 3 completely ODF States – Himachal Pradesh, Kerala and Sikkim and the percentage of households that have access to toilets to 58 per cent today from 38 per cent. SBM will also have a big impact on reducing girl child dropout rates from the education system, and help prevent many reported and unreported crimes against women, that are perpetrated due to open defecation.

Tata Trusts has also given their aid in 35 district governments across 9 States in areas of Behavioral Change Communication (BCC), technology innovations, promoting microfinance and microcredit, training and capacity building using advanced technologies such as Virtual Learning Centers (VLC).