

Sanitation: A Purification Process

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Gandhiji introduced personal hygiene, village and town sanitation as a constructive programme. Removal of untouchability was both a constructive programme and one of the eleven vows that each Satyagrahi had to follow

Four years earlier, paying tribute to the Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi, the fifteenth Prime Minister of India in his first Independence Day speech on August 15, 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. 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

We, the people of Hindustan, have a long way to go in performing our duty in order to fulfil the promise we have made to ourselves in the Preamble to our Constitution on January 26, 1950 – the Republic Day, to secure to all its citizens-Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. until every citizen has access to clean and potable drinking water and adequate sanitation facility, we will continue to be an unjust, un-liberated, and unequal society. Water and Sanitation (WATSAN) is most important for each and every citizen of our country. Indeed, it is our collective responsibility to move

towards *SwachhHindustan*.

Gandhiji's Idea of Swachh Hindustan

There is considerably more to Gandhiji's idea of a *Swachh Hindustan* than building toilets and making it free from open defecation free, although it is the first and very important step. Gandhiji wanted to see Hindustan *Swachh*– clean and cleansed, body and soul. He was distressed about the way we lived and maintained our inhabitations. Gandhiji felt deeply hurt the way we all treated communities who were condemned to handle filth and human excreta. Gandhiji also realised that Indians had, over time, developed a very unscientific attitude towards sanitation and hygiene. It was this attitude that was responsible for creating 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. Gandhiji picked up the broomstick –*Jhaadoo* and involved one and all in cleaning up house, ashram, neighbourhood, street and toilets. When he gave the call to improve sanitation and hygiene, he also had a firm agenda of integrating the condemned communities with all as equals without bias, prejudice and contempt. *Jhaadoo* was not just a symbol of physical cleanliness alone. He established *Jhaadoo* as a symbol of *Antyodaya*. He clearly led and

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advised on the journey of welfare from *Antyodaya* to *Sarvodaya*. Cleaning and cleansing were not limited to body and environs only. For Gandhiji, cleansing the soul was the ultimate goal for any human being. For him, building one's character ceaselessly in pursuit of Truth was the goal of life. Cultivating non-violence as a force was the way and process to cleanse the soul. Gandhiji had realised that there was a crisis amongst our population. It was crisis of confidence. We had given up our originality and had become a flattering lot under the British. Gandhiji spent his entire life in the act of cleansing self and soul and this he did by applying his self to public and social service. In this manner Gandhiji visualised to make Hindustan a *Swachh* nation where every citizen is clean and pure-physically, socially and from the heart.

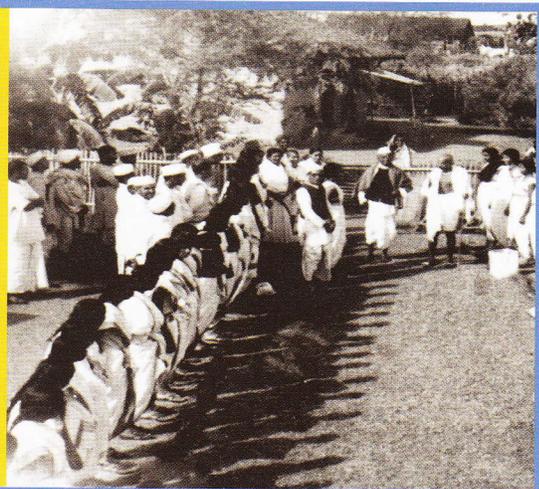
Sanitation and Hygiene in South Africa

Gandhiji had gone to South Africa for a job with a trading and business firm of Dada Abdulla. Within days, he tasted the arrogant and insulting attitude of British and European people towards Indians. The famous incident of his being pushed out by force from a first-class railway compartment made him feel like the rejection untouchable communities faced in India. He learned that the White community charged the Indian community, and publicly maintained that Indians lived in insanitary conditions and did not practice hygiene. Gandhiji also noticed that Indian communities also did not make efforts to practice good sanitation and hygiene.

The main objective of Gandhiji was to win, for Indian communities such locations in the towns and cities in South Africa that would be amenable to good sanitation and hygiene. Gandhiji strategically worked with the Indian community for improvement of sanitation practices at one level. Then he took up the matter with the civic authorities and went on insisting for improving the physical infrastructure and its maintenance. He then addressed

“ Everyone must be his own scavenger. If you become your own sweeper, not only will you ensure perfect sanitation for yourself, but you will make your surroundings clean ”

-Mahatma Gandhi (Bapu)



the state governments and the office of Secretaries of the Colonies in Africa and the India to raise the issue of neglect on part of the civic authorities. Gandhiji stands out as a unique personality in public life who demonstrated and promoted the cause of private and public sanitation.

Insanitation in India

Back from South Africa, Gandhiji travelled the length and breadth of India. He witnessed and experienced insanitation, lack of cleanliness, unhygienic environment, dirt and filth throughout the country. He and his group first stayed in Tagore's Shantiniketan where Gandhiji found that the Brahmin cooks practiced purity and pollution principles but maintained very unhygienic habits. Sanitation arrangements were bad. He and his team introduced inmates' participation in cleaning and cooking. Gandhiji had decided to travel with the common people in third class in railways and as a deck passenger on ships. On his deck travel, he noted 'What was an apology for a bath room which was unbearably dirty and 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.' In a train travel he noted '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 a 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. Amongst them I have seen the students world also. Sometimes they behave no better. They speak English and they wear Norfolk Jackets and therefore they 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.'

Sanitation in Indian Cities

Similar was the situation in temples he visited. During his visit to Hardwar and Hrishikesh, he noted that 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 him with agony to see people performing natural functions on the thorough fares and river banks. It was no different in Vrindavan in Mathura, Vishwanath temple in Benares, and Dakor in Gujarat. In cities, towns and villages that he visited, the conditions with respect to sanitation and hygiene were no better.

Habitations were no different. When he visited Benares in 1916,



he found that the old proper city was usually a stinking den with the hamlet (mohalla) based easy going habitations that abused existing sanitation laws and civic traditions. While passing through a mohalla, experiencing a spit from the building above would be a common experience. In the then Madras city, he commented on the unhygienic practices and arrogant attitude of the high caste towards the class that cleaned up. In the holy town of Gaya in Bihar, he faced worst of sanitation and hygiene.

In educational institutions and the public events such as conferences, Gandhiji for the first time brought up the issue of sanitation and hygiene. After Gandhiji's arrival in India, in every event that he attended, sanitation committee was first to be organised in which all attending leaders had to volunteer in day to day cleaning activities including cleaning of temporary toilets. This then became a practice with Congress sessions with or without Gandhiji until after Independence. In the Ashrams where Gandhiji lived and worked and the educational institutions he established, cleaning was a daily routine for all inmates.

Gandhiji in Action on Sanitation

Right science and appropriate technology were needed and pursued by Gandhiji and the inmates in his Ashram. In the rules that he framed for the Ashram in Ahmedabad he

wrote that sanitary services were essential as sacred services and yet it was looked down upon in the society, with the result that it was generally neglected and afforded considerable scope for improvement. The Ashram, therefore, laid special stress upon engaging no outside labour for this work. The members themselves attended to the whole of the sanitation requirements by turns. New entrants were generally first attached to this department. Let us remember that Gandhiji was an extremely busy person and he accounted for every minute he lived and yet he always had time to participate in the sanitation work in his abodes. There is a lesson for all of us. We are perhaps satisfied only by a symbolic action of cleaning the toilet and neighbourhood environment and then leave it for the system to take care.

In Sevagram Ashram at Wardha in late 1930s, his attention towards sanitation had not ebbed. In fact, he detailed it in the following way for the inmates.

“Everyone must wash his dish thoroughly and keep it in its place. Guests and visitors are requested to bring their own plate, drinking pot, bowls, and spoon as well as lantern, bedding, mosquito net and napkins... Everything must be kept in its proper place. All refuse must be put in the dustbin. Water must not be wasted. Boiled water is used for drinking

purposes. Pots and Pens are finally washed with boiled water. Unboiled water from the Ashram wells is not safe to drink...We should not spit or clean the nose on the road, but only in an out of the way place where no one is likely to walk.

Nature's need must be attended to only at the appointed place. It is necessary to clean oneself after answering both the calls of nature. The receptacle for the solid contents is, as it has always been, different from that for liquid contents of the latrines. We must wash our hands with pure earth and pure water and wipe them with a clean napkin. The night soil must be fully covered with dry earth so as not to attract flies, and in such a way that nothing but dry earth is visible. One must carefully sit on the latrine seat so that the seat does not get dirty. A lantern must be carried if it is dark. Everything that attracts flies should be properly covered.²⁹

To the credit of the Sanitation person of India it should be remembered that until last days of the life he never gave up the subject. In the prayer meetings that he addressed during late 1947 and January 1948, he, on several occasions, appealed to people to keep the clean and sanitised, and practice good personal hygiene.

Status of Sanitation in the Country

The situation with respect to construction of toilets has improved significantly in the country. The Prime Minister has recently announced in a public meeting that the toilet coverage in the country which was around 40 percent in 2014 has gone up to 90 per cent and more. About 4.5 lakh villages are covered with toilets. This is impressive, but a first step in sanitation and hygiene. Even the Total Sanitation Campaign includes construction of individual household toilets, coverage of rural schools, and solid waste management. We need to perform on the last two aspects.

The State has to respond too in a more comprehensive manner. Despite the ban on manual scavenging in India, over 300 cases of deaths due to manual scavenging have been reported from across the country in 2017.³ An inter-ministerial task force has counted up to 53,236 people involved in manual scavenging in India, a four-fold rise from the 13,000-odd such workers accounted for in official records until 2017. It covers 121 districts out of 600 and more. This figure still does not include those involved in cleaning sewers and septic tanks, in Railways, which is the largest employer of manual scavengers.⁴ The country should respond to this immediately and rededicate itself to the task of doing away with manual scavenging. Total sanitation campaign should be the goal of the state, the society and the citizen.

Turning the Searchlight Inward

Gandhiji's work for improving sanitation and his campaign for removal of untouchability was also an essential component of Satyagraha with self and society. Satyagraha implied process of self-purification. Sanitation and Hygiene were for him important even for embarking on a spiritual journey. The quest for Truth took him to an understanding that all human beings and for that matter all living beings were equal before the ultimate Truth who he called God. Cleaning self and environment, for Gandhiji, was the first step in the act of self-purification. The second and most important part of self-purification was-giving up age old prejudices against the Dalits who were the silent and suffering sanitation workers in the society. Gandhiji wanted that every caste Hindu should first realise the gross injustice that was meted out to Dalits across the centuries. The second stage was its admission and sense of remorse. Finally, he wanted that each one of Caste Hindus worked for reparation i.e., removing untouchability and helping improve their welfare.

Gandhiji introduced personal hygiene, village and town sanitation as a constructive programme. Removal of untouchability was both a constructive programme and one of the eleven vows that each Satyagrahi had to follow. The sanitation and hygiene scene in India still needs substantial reform and improvement. We have not yet fully responded to Gandhiji. Gandhi understood the sociology and tried to introduce dignity to sanitation thus providing dignity to the traditional sanitary workers who were condemned to do it. After Independence, we forgot to focus on individual and education of individuals. Instead, the state assumed all responsibility and turned the campaign into schemes. The schemes are reduced to targets, structures and numbers. Gandhi emphasized on sanitation education. What most of us in India require is 'toilet training' and, sanitation and hygiene education.

As a people we are yet to behave responsibly. People continue to be ignorant, arrogant and irresponsible in attitude and, filthy and dirty in habits. We leave our toilets dirty, neighbourhood filthy and we litter and dirty public places including buses, rails and ships. *Swachh Hindustan* is still a dream for us and we need to work hard.

We, as a society continue to discriminate and exercise untouchability in subtle ways. The caste curse has not gone. Our inner-selves are not clean 'nirmal'. Self-regulation and governance is not fully understood and people in public and political life are not clean.

It is time to turn the searchlight inwards and improve to pay tribute to Gandhiji and feel responsible to self and society.

Footnotes

1. <http://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/tag/speech/> 18December, 2015
2. M.K. Gandhi, 1955. *Ashram observances in Action*, translated from Gujarati by ValjiGovindji Desai, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad pp 149 – 51. Can be also

accessed at Gandhi Heritage Portal.

3. For full report see <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/12448-over-300-manual-scavengers-died-2017>
4. For full report see <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/53000-manual-scavengers-in-12-states-four-fold-rise-from-last-official-count-5218032/> □

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Success Story

Pune village communities open their household toilets to Wari pilgrims

People from homes along the route of the famous Wari pilgrimage route in Pune in Maharashtra, opened up their toilets for the use of pilgrims during their 15-day travel, their destination being Pandharpur.

The Palkhi or procession which is a 333 year old glorious tradition of Maharashtra, observed across the state began this year on July 6, 2018 and ended on 22nd July, 2018. Over 10 lakh pilgrims or Warkaris normally join this procession from within the state and outside.

During the last two years, as a part of the Swachh Bharat Mission Grameen (SBM-G) campaign more than two lakh toilets were built across the district yet they were never adequate to meet the requirement of the masses on their long walk.

However, this year all private households on the pilgrimage routes were requested to offer their private toilets, for the use of these Warkaris (pilgrims). A white flag was set up on every toilet to indicate that it is freely available for the use of the weary travelers. People started responding to this appeal overwhelmingly. Even the economically disadvantaged opened their homes for the pilgrims.