

Sanitising the Country

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The problem of sanitation and hygiene among rural populace in the country was felt seriously by Gandhiji and his team of volunteers when they began their work in Champaran. Sanitation was a difficult affair in the villages, a salutary commitment to sanitation was a given and contained core element of Gandhiji's concept of social reform.

Gandhiji, while travelling the length and breadth of India during first two years after returning from South Africa, had realised that sanitation and social hygiene was a huge and perhaps insurmountable problem. It was not the lack of knowledge alone but also the mind-set which prevented people from attending to the most vital problem affecting health and environs. In South Africa, Gandhiji admitted that Indians had problems with sanitation and hygiene as alleged by the British, although he successfully argued and protested that the main reason for discrimination was colour prejudice and threat of competition. However in his own country, the insanitation, dirt, filth along with taboo, stigma and exploitation attached with the scavenging community glared at him wherever he went. Gandhiji had already penned Hind Swaraj in 1909. In his scheme of Gram Swaraj and Hind Swaraj as self-rule, fighting for political freedom of the country could not have been a standalone proposition. Self-improvement was the key and he introduced the concept and action related to it. Later, it was conceptualised as Ashram

Observances and Constructive Work. Thus, sanitation and hygiene and removal of untouchability became two major constructive programmes.

Gandhiji at Champaran

The seriousness of the problem of sanitation and hygiene among rural populace in the country had become evident to Gandhiji and his team of volunteers when they began their work in Champaran. The first thing

that hit Gandhiji was that work of a permanent nature was impossible without proper village education.

Sanitation was a difficult affair in the villages of Champaran. Gandhiji noted that even the landless labour families were not willing to do their own scavenging. Dr. Dev who had joined the Champaran team took up regular sweeping of roads and courtyards, cleaning the wells, filling up the water pools, etc. An atmosphere of self-reliance for village cleaning was built slowly.

Gandhiji's conviction about the need of education, training and practice for orientation and aptitude led him to teach sanitation and hygiene in Champaran and in Satyagraha Ashram schools. The women of the Champaran team were told that teachings of cleanliness, hygiene and good manners had priority over literary subjects. It may be noted that thenceforth sanitation and hygiene became indispensable and foundational work in all the political programmes and social reforms.

At the Ashrams

Lessons in sanitation practices had begun in Phoenix Ashram in South Africa for Gandhiji and



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all inmates. By the beginning of the twentieth century flush toilets were in fairly advanced stages and implications of faecal contaminations were well-known. However, adequate and assured water was critical requirement to promote and practice flush toilets connected with proper drains and disposal systems. In rural areas it was very difficult to accomplish. The challenge before Gandhiji at Phoenix was the right science and appropriate technology. Covering human excreta with adequate dry earth and safe disposal of the collected store became established practice among all models. In all experiments, the excreta was finally transferred to the farm and converted into organic fertiliser. Prabhudas Gandhi has noted that if one goes through the history of Gandhiji's Ashrams carefully, one would realise that experiments in toilets had a unique place. If someone could document the process minutely from beginning to end an authentic and classic manual on toilet making and use could be prepared.

For Gandhiji, sanitation and hygiene became an important agenda in India. Gandhiji's desire to remove the blot of untouchability from the Indian society for good compelled him to work on toilets and hygiene. He had not accepted the social tradition of the scavenging work to be done by a section of people who were condemned to do and further condemned for doing so.

A salutary commitment to sanitation was a given and contained core element of social reform.

The Ashram had special stress upon engaging no outside labour for this work. The members themselves attended to the whole of the sanitation in turns.

Inmates had to take care that the roads and paths were not spoilt by spitting or otherwise. Gandhiji would welcome the zealous, committed youth with nationalist fervour who

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desired to join Ashrams but would warn that she/ he would have to pass the test of cleaning the toilet bucket.

During his Stays in Ashram founded and supported by Jammalal Bajaj at Wardha, Mirabehn - Miss Slade informed him, when she went for a morning walk found people of the adjacent village Sindi defecated in open on the road. Gandhiji advised her to visit the village daily and clean the roads.

Sanitation and hygiene was on agenda in Sevagram Ashram too, which was Gandhiji's home from April 1936 to August 1946. In 'Rules of Sevagram Ashram', it was mentioned that ...Water must not be wasted. Boiled water is used for drinking purposes....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.... The receptacle for the solid contents is, as it always be, different from that for liquid contents of the latrines. ...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 seat does not get dirty. A lantern must be carried if it is dark. Everything that attracts flies should be properly covered.

In Public Meetings and Municipal Receptions

Gandhiji addressed many public gatherings, meetings, small groups, volunteers, women and inmates of the

Ashrams. Many municipalities gave him civic receptions. On most of these occasions he brought up the subject of sanitation and hygiene.

In almost every Congress major convention Gandhi in his speech touched upon the sanitation issue. For Gandhi, insanitation was an evil. He had said,

... There is a Trinity of Evil—insanitation, poverty and idleness—that you will have to be faced with and you will fight them with broom-sticks, quinine and castor oil and, if you will believe me, with the spinning-wheel.

Gandhi addressed in receptions and appreciations given to him by the towns and city municipalities and drew attention towards insanitation and appealed to improve the sanitation. He considered sanitation work as one of the most important works of the municipalities. When Congress wanted to participate in municipal elections; his advice was that the congress workers after becoming councillors should become quality sanitation workers.

He developed an admiration for the municipal administration in the West with regards to sanitation. Responding to a civic reception at Belgaum on December 21, 1924 he said,

The one thing which we can and must learn from the West is the science of municipal sanitation. By instinct and habit we are used to village life, where the need for corporate sanitation is not much felt. But as the Western civilization is materialistic and therefore tends towards the development of the cities to the neglect of villages, the peoples of the West have evolved a science of corporate sanitation and from which we have much to learn. Our narrow and tortuous lanes, our congested ill-ventilated houses, our criminal neglect of sources of drinking water require remedying. Every municipality can render the greatest service by insisting on people observing the laws of sanitation.

In Periodicals

Gandhiji edited and contributed articles and notes to several periodicals. He wrote about sanitation and hygiene related issues frequently in Navajivan and Young India and later in Harijan. Insanitation in the villages and urban settlements in the country weighed heavily on his mind. During the Kheda Satyagraha; he wrote about the condition of home, pond and fields in regard to sanitation and hygiene in Navajivan. His agony was that the farmer and his family lived in such insanitary and unhygienic conditions out of ignorance and lack of concern.

Gandhiji was more decent in using an expression 'open evacuation' in place of open defecation that is used in the national and international reports in present times. He pointed out in the article that not using latrines and open evacuation practice was the cause for many diseases. The old, children, sick and weak persons in the family and in the hamlets could not go out for evacuation and hence turned the courtyard, lanes or houses into latrines, dirtying the place and poisoning the air. He then recommended that people should build simple toilets or should have system of containers where method



of covering the excreta with dry earth should be practiced with diligence.

Gandhiji continued to write about sanitation and hygiene at every opportunity. Although he never agreed, but was able to understand that the destitute, poor, and people of condemned class had come to accept insanitation as part of their lives. In Gandhiji's words, the problem of sanitation and hygiene was at 'corporate' level. He also noted that Indians were indeed good at keeping the house and the courtyard clean of dirt, insects and reptiles; but would not hesitate to shove all into the neighbour's yard! We the people have not got rid of this character even to this day.

On an evening in January 1935 Prof. Winsor of St. Stephen's College Delhi called on Gandhiji with a dozen of students. While replying to question of helping village people with medical aid, Gandhiji said that they should be teaching sanitation, and hygiene as prevention and after-care were more important and relevant. Distributing a thousand malaria pills was good but not congratulatory. Lessons of prevention by filling up cesspools, draining the waste water, dredging of wells and cleaning up tanks would earn high appreciation.

When asked for his guidance about teaching in the school for Harijans, Gandhiji reiterated his unmistakable priority for lessons in sanitation and hygiene. He said, let me assure you that education in three R's (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) is as nothing compared to a sound grounding in the elements of hygiene and sanitation... Literary training by itself is not of much account.

Take care of the essentials I have told you. Remember that unlettered persons have found no difficulty in ruling over large States. Teach them the three R's by all means, but don't make a fetish of them.

Gandhiji continued to tell students and workers about the importance of sanitation work and advised them to take it up as the first task. From 1946 to January 1948 he intensified his emphasis on education for sanitation and hygiene. Railway and ship travel according to him offered best chances of public education on sanitation and hygiene.

Sanitation and hygiene was very much on Gandhiji's mind because what he was seeing in the refugee camps disturbed him deeply soon after independence. On 13 October, 1947 he told that he attached great importance to this problem of cleanliness and status of sanitation in refugee camps. He told that although Indians had some experience in organising fairs, religious gatherings and Congress sessions and conferences, but as a population we were not accustomed to camp life. Indians lacked sense of social hygiene leading to dangerous levels of insanitation with attendant risk of outbreak of infectious and contagious diseases.

On 29 January, 1948, a day before he was martyred, he drafted the Constitution for the proposed Lok Sevak Sangh. Later it came to be known as Gandhiji's Last Will and Testament. In this document the sixth function of a sevak was drafted as under.

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

Sanitation and hygiene was and had remained a priority for Gandhiji all his life and it appeared in his last. □

(Excerpts from the book, 'In the Footsteps of Mahatma... Gandhi and Sanitation', Publications Division, 2016).