

The Needle's Eye



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One Hundred Days of Latitude

If Modi fails to achieve his goal of a toilet in every home by Gandhiji's 150th birth anniversary in five years, his Swachh Bharat Abhiyan could easily end up being a pale replica of UPA's Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan

Marked one hundred days of the Narendra Modi government by meeting four women called Usha Chaurani, Guddi Athwal, Annu Parmol and Sumita Chawaria who have travelled in just over a decade from the lowest rung of India's caste ladder to a future that holds hope and optimism. Their lives and their stories were more uplifting than all the words being spoken and written about India's huge problem of open defecation and the urgent need for more toilets.

Twelve years ago Usha was walking on a street in Alwar, Rajasthan, carrying a load of human excrement, when she was accosted by an elderly man who asked her if she wanted to free herself from her wretched existence. At that time Usha earned ₹10 a month from each upper-caste person whose waste she carried away. People gave her leftover food for her young family, and sometimes castaway clothes. Soon after her encounter with Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, who is famous for inventing the two-pit Sulabh Shuchalaya, Usha travelled to Delhi with her husband and three children. Five years later, in 1998, she and 35 other women got on a plane to New York. At the UN, they attended a conference to mark the Year of Sanitation. They also proudly showed off clothes they had stitched and strutted their stuff on a catwalk alongside professional models. Since then Usha has travelled to other countries as president of Sulabh International, whose main mission is to stamp out the scourge of scavenging by "night-soil workers", mostly women from the Valmiki community who were treated as untouchables. India has laws against manual scavenging, but the practice endures alongside the absence of toilets.

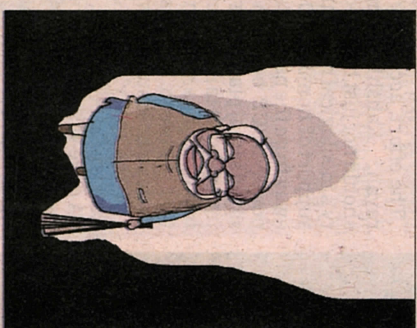
Usha told me about how she did not bathe for days on end when she was young (she was married off at ten) because it made no sense to clean up in a household that reeked of excrement. She and her children were in poor health. Vomiting, fever and diarrhoea were common. But that was the only life she knew. Pathak told her he would pay her a stipend of ₹1,500 a month if she agreed to learn new skills. Her mother-in-law was suspicious: what if all this was a ruse? Her husband

IN THE TOP LEAGUE
Bindeshwar Pathak believes Modi is the first Indian leader after Mahatma Gandhi to see that even more revolutionary than building toilets is the liberation of people



thought they had little to lose and would get to see big city Delhi. Six Maruti cars brought Usha's and several other families to the capital. She was taught about hygiene and cleanliness. She used to figh when she was told to shower every morning. The trainer told her nobody would buy anything she made if she was herself unclean.

Many other things have changed for these four women and their families. They were taught to read and



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write, and learned how to make papads, pickles and jute bags and run beauty parlours. The local priest invited Usha to his son's wedding. They have gone to worship in temples, eaten at the same tables as the people whose excrement they once carried away, and been allowed to touch the vegetables and fruit they buy and not have the shopkeeper fling them into their bags so their fingers would not pollute his wares. Pathak believes Modi is the first

this column is not 'One hundred days of lassitude'. We have a government that appears to be working, wars and all. We have a foreign policy that is getting an optimistic India into headlines that are otherwise blotted by the word 'crisis' - in Ukraine, Syria, Gaza, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. We have a finance and defence minister who is impatient for change. We have an education minister who can nimbly navigate gut-rus, teachers and essay competitions. We have a prime minister who can joke about snakes and mice while drumming up investment or playing the Pied Piper on a flute on his visit to Japan. And we have a stock market that has risen more than 12 per cent since this government won power.

Managers and business schools like to talk about 100-day agendas. Things are a little different in the life of a nation. Narendra Modi's first 100 days haven't been a honeymoon, but they are a precious one-twentieth of his total term. The average Indian has given Modi a lot of latitude. Now he needs to work even harder to redraw the map.

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