

Cleaning Up India With Gandhiji



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The smartest thing Prime Minister Narendra Modi did was to hitch the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) to the aura of Mahatma Gandhi. From its official launch at Raj Ghat on Gandhi Jayanti 2014, the Clean India message has been omnipresent and relentless. Like Gandhi's mantra of swarajya, Modi has turned Swachh Bharat into a mass movement, a jan andolan that you cannot quarrel with whatever your political stripe.

Gandhi spoke and wrote prolifically, using his magazines Navajivan, Harijan and Young India, postcards, letters and telegrams. Modi has also been a constant communicator about Swachh Bharat in his speeches, but he also has the power of social media, and a Swachh Bharat app so you can take pictures of dirt and garbage that are geo-spatially tagged and hopefully cleaned up.

As is typical of this government's social-sector projects, the bells and whistles are bright and loud. The SBM-Gramin dashboard has whirling numbers — 85.28 million toilets built until Wednesday, 453,211 open-defecation free (ODF) villages (that means about 150,000 to go), and 21 states and Union territories (out of 36) certified to be ODF.

SBM marketing has permeated our lives. Gandhi's wire-rimmed glasses, the SBM logo, are printed on every banknote, and Modi loses no opportunity to repeat the message. He has vowed to make India ODF by October 2, 2019, Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary. In April, Modi travelled to Champaran to mark the 101st anniversary of Gandhiji's first non-

cooperation movement in India. He addressed 20,000 swachhagrahis, who had spent a week in training and sharing experiences and best practices.

An army of 450,000 swachhagrahis across the country, paid for by state governments, are the foot-soldiers of the campaign. Local inhabitants, they are trained for a few days before they head into the villages. Their aim is to spread participation and behavioural change. These village motivators are evaluated on their success in transformation: have they accomplished the 'triggering' in a village that fires up the community? How many toilets have been built, and used, in that village? And has that village remained ODF?

There are other fighters in the field. The Tata Trusts funded about 450 young professionals who signed up for a year's fieldwork, assisting district collectors in the cleanliness campaign. In addition, between May and July this year, about 200,000 Swachh Bharat summer interns put in a hundred hours each in villages close to where they live, earning two credits from the University Grants Commission.

Everybody is made part of the movement: schoolchildren who last year produced 30 million paintings on cleanliness; a March 2019 target for the Railways to switch to clean train toilets; a new sanitation line item in every ministry's annual budget; the India Sanitation Coalition which brought together about 400 companies; the Swachh Bharat Kosh (fund) which has scooped up ₹860 crore in CSR (corporate social responsibility) funds; and the ₹100 crore donated by Mata Amritanandamayi.

Modi has also enlisted a long line of celebrities to propagate Swachh Bharat and perform symbolic acts like Swachhata Hi Seva clean-ups or even shovel out human compost from twin-pit toilets. Amitabh Bachchan did a Darwaza Band infomercial where the actor himself sings the campaign anthem. Akshay Kumar, whose Toilet: Ek Prem Katha was a box-office success, has announced a sequel. Kumar has also made television spots pushing the twin-pit technology.

Making India clean, leave alone keeping it clean, is a Sisyphean task. We are a naturally littering people, an 'effluent nation' — did you see that picture of garbage deposited by

floodwater on a Kerala bridge? Building toilets is not enough — is ODF sustainable, and will our villages learn solid and liquid waste management?

Three surveys over the past three years have kept track of Swachh Bharat claims. The latest, the National Annual Rural Sanitation Survey 2017-18, was conducted by an independent verification agency under World Bank supervision in 6,136 villages across India. It checked toilets and usage in households, schools, Anganwadis and community latrines. It found that 77% of households had toilets, 93.4% of those who had toilets used them, and 95.6% of claimed ODF villages were confirmed.

Starting September 29, delegates from 65 countries will gather in Delhi at the Mahatma Gandhi International Sanitation Convention, and on October 2, the final day, UN Secretary General António Guterres will join Modi to signal support for Swachh Bharat.

The drive to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 6.2 — access to equitable sanitation and hygiene for all — has been impressive, but India is still doing poorly on the first part of SDG 6 (every household with a tap and access to drinking water). Water supply is vital for sanitation. Currently, about 78% of habitations get at least 40 litres of water per capita per day — but most of this comes from a common tap, hand-pump or well.

Common taps, called public stand-posts, supply 56% of rural households; only 17% of homes have their own taps. Most of the supply is from groundwater which is rapidly depleting. When Modi launched Swachh Bharat, India was estimated to have 600 million people, nearly half its population, defecating in the open. That number is down sharply, but still around 150 million. India ranks 112th among 156 on the SDG Index for 2018.



Writing's on the wall

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