

Jago Swachhata Prerak! Modi Rides In From The West

The Needle's Eye



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Thousands of grumpy bureaucrats are being forced to sacrifice a long weekend — there are too many of them anyway this year in India — and clean toilets on Mahatma Gandhi's birthday as Prime Minister Narendra Modi launches his Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Movement) by wielding a broom himself in a Delhi slum on Thursday. His government pledged last week to spend about ₹2 lakh crore (\$32.8 billion) on building more than 111 million toilets. That is a big commitment, but will it wean away the 53% of Indians who defecate in the open in our cities, towns and villages? Let's wait and see, considering that a SQUAT (sanitation quality, use, access and trends) survey of over 3,200 households over 300 villages in Bihar, Haryana, MP, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh found that 47% of open defecators find it "pleasurable, comfortable or convenient".

We Indians also find it pleasurable to spit and throw our litter in open spaces. The men among us urinate in public. We want our homes to be clean, but don't hesitate to throw our garbage out the kitchen window in open, putrid piles. We are one giant subcontinent-sized sewer.

Open defecation breeds infections

and poor health and has economic consequences. Two studies by Dean Spears at the Delhi School of Economics showed that Indian children are stunted in height compared with children in even poorer sub-Saharan countries, and that better sanitation led to lower infant-mortality rates. Another by Spears and Sneha Lamba showed that children using toilets have better cognitive skills than those who don't. "Our results suggest... that open defecation is an important threat to the human capital of the Indian labour force," the authors wrote.

I'm sure most of the 65% of Indians under the age of 35 that Modi frequently invokes will not have read any of the writings of Gandhi, whom too Modi invokes so frequently. The Mahatma was unambiguous about cleanliness. "A lavatory must be as clean as a drawing-room," he wrote, and "Everyone must be his own scavenger" and "Sanitation is more important than independence" and "I will not let anyone walk through my mind with their dirty feet".

When I lived in Singapore I thought the city republic was obsessively clean — until I visited the Little India neighbourhood and found several horrors, including elevators reeking of urine. A



ANIRBAN

prominent eatery in Bangalore used to invite customers to exit through its spanking-clean kitchen, a rare sight.

Is this the first time the government is focusing on toilets, cleanliness and safe water? Not at all. Swachh Bharat has merely replaced the UPA's Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (NBA), which too sought to build toilets across India, even in schools, and make the nation Open Defecation Free by 2022 — a deadline Modi has brought forward by three years. The NBA itself tried in 2012 to reinvent the Total Sanitation Campaign, which

WHAT A PLEASURE?

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in 1999 succeeded the Rural Sanitation Programme. The UPA named Swachhata Preraks or sanitation coordinators who were supposed to be working in 607 rural districts, and eventually in every village. Good intentions do not work too well, as a couple of swachhata preraks I spoke with said ruefully. Even when toilets are built, people continue to defecate in the open. Changing mindsets is difficult.

About 19,000 Indian-Americans yelled "Yes we can" when Modi asked if they would like to help him clean up India, although it was not

clear how they would get their hands dirty. He received messianic adulation at the Madison Square Garden rally. Hundreds of NRIs gathered in Times Square to watch him speak on giant screens; thousands more held 'Super Modi' parties across the US. His speech sounded like election rhetoric, down to campaign promises like giving Person of Indian Origin cards lifetime validity. Of course the NRIs were greedy and in a memorandum asked Modi for more — dual citizenship, the right to vote in Indian elections, to buy up to 20 acres of agricultural land, and to acquire Aadhaar cards. Still, the diaspora pulled off a sound-and-light show worthy of the Big Apple's entertainment hub, with several US politicians in attendance. Indian-Americans make up just over 1% of the US population but punch far above their weight thanks to their superior education and six-figure family incomes. Many of them hold key government and business positions, but have not so far spoken in one voice as a powerful lobby influencing US policy towards India.

Partly because of their newly visible clout, Modi got extraordinary kid-glove treatment from a US establishment that had only recently shunned him. President Barack

Obama spent quite a bit of quality time with Modi, including a walk around the Martin Luther King memorial, and the two men issued a long and verbose statement after their talks in Washington. It trod much ground covered by declarations made by Obama and Manmohan Singh exactly a year ago and in November 2010, but also set out expanded collaboration in defence, technology and climate change. It named a number of Pakistan-based terrorist groups just as the US Treasury Department announced sanctions against the leaders and assets of two of them, Harkat-ul-Mujahidin and Lashkar-e-Taiba. The statement skirted India's tough stand at the WTO and its participation in the fight against ISIS, the Sunni terror caliphate. But there was also a specific mention of territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, a shot across China's bows just 10 days after President Xi Jinping's visit to India. All in all, rich pickings for Modi.

Over the past month Modi's elliptical orbit has taken in Japan, America and Mars. He will touch down this week on the campaign trail in Maharashtra and Haryana. We can trust our democratic timetable to grant us frequent elections, and bring us down to earth.