

“Swachhta Hi Seva”- A Pioneer Gandhian Idea in Contemporary Era

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Many voices heard after the Prime minister of India in his speech on 15 august 2014 on Independence Day spoke of ‘Swachh Bharat’. On Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday i.e. 2nd October 2014 that campaign was launched with much fanfare. Gandhiji being chosen as an inspiration to Swachh Bharat, we have once again reaffirmed our faith in the legacy of the Father of the Nation. Mahatma Gandhi whom the nation relegated to archives, came alive on his birthday that year when many appeared on the print and electronic media, holding a broom for a few minutes shown sweeping the already sanitised streets in ‘Swachh uniforms’. These Swachh uniforms remained spotlessly Swachh after the ritual was over. The ‘elite sweepers’ were smilingly sweeping in the company of dozens of other men and women, when photographed. Sweeping public places is a very tedious and back breaking business; it is no smiling business, since sweeping public places brings forth dust allergy, running nose, watery eyes and smelling uniforms. And why our public spirited men and women should sweep only ‘symbolically’; why not as a daily routine, if they took the pledge to clean India in earnest and with conviction.

Gandhi learnt scavenging in South Africa. His friends there lovingly called him the great scavenger. Mahatma Gandhi said ‘Sanitation is more important than independence’. He made Cleanliness and sanitation an integral part of the Gandhian way of living. His dream was total sanitation for all. Cleanliness is most important for the physical well being and a healthy environment. It has bearing on public and personal hygiene. It is essential for everyone to learn about cleanliness, hygiene, sanitation and the various diseases that are caused due to poor hygienic conditions. Mahatma Gandhi said, ‘I will not let anyone walk through my mind with their dirty feet’. This turned the people’s thoughts to Gandhi’s idea of cleanliness. What is the need of it? How did Mahatma Gandhi communicate this idea to the contemporary society of India. To answer these questions it is necessary to know Mahatma Gandhi’s views about cleanliness.

Mahatma Gandhi had realized early in his life that the prevalent poor state of sanitation and cleanliness in India and particularly the lack of adequate toilets, in the then largely rural India, needed as much attention as was being devoted toward attainment of Swaraj. He said that unless we “rid ourselves of our dirty habits and have improved latrines, Swaraj can have no value for us.” Swachh Bharat scheme is launched with Mahatma Gandhi as its inspiration. I wonder, how many people have read what Gandhi has to say on the subject? This brief write up below is but a glimpse of some of Gandhi's views on cleanliness and how he personally went about doing it with no camera in attendance. Gandhi strongly and repeatedly condemned the Indian practice of hiring people from the lowest rungs of the Hindu caste system, who were once called “untouchables,” to manually clean out primitive dry latrines or collect waste from fields where villagers relieved themselves, urging his countrymen to clean up after themselves. Gandhiji offered detailed comments in *Navajivan*, dated 02-11-1919, on cleanliness and good habits and indicated their close relationship with good health:

“No one should spit or clean his nose on the streets. In some cases, the sputum is so harmful that the germs are carried from it and they infect others with tuberculosis. In some places spitting on the road is a criminal offence. Those who spit after chewing betel leaves and tobacco have no consideration for the feelings of others. Spittle, mucus from the nose, etc., should also be covered with earth.”

“Near the village or dwellings, there should be no ditches in which water can collect. Mosquitoes do not breed where water does not stagnate. Where there are no mosquitoes, the incidence of malaria is low. At one time, water used to collect around Delhi. After the hollows were filled, mosquitoes were greatly reduced and so also was malaria.”

He once said, “It is health that is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver.

Having observed the scrupulous rules of cleanliness in the West, Gandhi could not resist applying the same in his life and in the lives of millions who followed him. In May 1925, in an edition of “Navajivan,” a weekly newspaper that Gandhi edited from 1919, he wrote about the importance of keeping lavatories clean. “I learnt 35 years ago that a lavatory must be as clean as a drawing room,” Gandhiji had once remarked. Taking his learning to a higher level, he had made his toilet (in his Sewagram at Wardha) literally a place of worship – cleanliness is next to godliness. The ambitious task of making the country ‘open defecation free by October 2, 2019, is the first step in that direction and a formidable undertaking in giving a functional toilet to each of over 50 million households in the country.

In 1915, Gandhi went to the Kumbh Mela, a triennial festival that rotates between four Indian cities. That year, it was held in the Hindu holy city of Haridwar in India’s north on the bank of the River Ganges. After seeing millions of devotees take a dip in the sacred river in attempt to wash away their sins, Gandhi later wrote in “Young India,” an English weekly he edited from 1919, “I had gone there full of hope and reverence. But while I realized the grandeur of the holy Ganga and the holier Himalayas, I saw little to inspire me in what man was doing in this holy place. “To my great grief, I discovered insanitation, both moral and physical. There is defilement of the mighty stream [the River Ganges] even in the name of religion,” he wrote. “Thoughtless ignorant men and women use for natural functions the sacred banks of the river where they are supposed to sit in quiet contemplation and find God. They violate religion, science and the laws of sanitation.” In the present time, Cleaning the River Ganges has been the national priority of the Indian government for years now. In May, Indian Government approved 200 billion rupees, for a program aimed at cleaning the Ganga. This is how the Gandhi’s idea of cleanliness is relevant even today also.

For Gandhiji, Swachhta was Equal to Ahimsa. India’s battle for cleanliness and hygiene has got a fillip through the Swachhta Hi seva – Cleanliness is service – campaign, which seeks to make sanitation a shared responsibility. Embedded in the idea of this top-up initiative to the already ongoing Swachh Bharat Mission is a clear invocation for the masses to shun the entrenched notion that cleanliness is a task for the ‘others’ who have historically been performing it for the rest of ‘us’. However, converting a ‘toilet movement’ into a ‘social movement’ wherein actual toilet usage becomes a norm, will call for pulling lessons from the life of Gandhiji. The one episode of Gandhiji’s life in which his wife Kasturba expresses disgust when asked to carry and clean the chamber pots. Gandhiji rebuked her to leave the house if she did not want to be her own scavenger. In doing so, Gandhi ji had expressed a violent

behaviour, albeit for a short time, to inculcate in her the value of cleanliness. To him, Cleanliness was equal to or at times even above, non-violence. The word 'Balmiki' and the work of manual scavenging got its sanctity when Gandhi ji called this is a beautiful name and said 'I Love Scavenging'. He further glorified it by comparing it to the service of mother to her children and said that "A Bhangi does for society what a mother does for her baby. A mother washes her baby off the dirt and insures his health. Even so the 'Bhangi' protects and safeguards the health of entire community by maintaining sanitation for it." (Gandhi ji in Harijan, 28/11/1936 as cited in Ramaswamy 2005:90).

Gandhiji was once asked by a foreign correspondent in 1946 that if he were to be the Viceroy of India for one day, what he would do. He replied that he would spend the day cleaning the Augean stables of the scavengers near the Viceroy's House, and that he would do the same the next day and then on the next day. (Reference: Bahuroopee Gandhi by Anu Bandopadhyay, page 29). He said, "We can no more gain God's blessing with an unclean body than with an unclean mind. A clean body cannot reside in an unclean city. So long as you do not take the broom and the bucket in your hands, you cannot make your towns and cities clean."

Gandhi was martyred soon after India became independent. After independence, the issue of sanitation has received the government's attention though sporadically and even Gandhiji's ideas and values of sanitation spread throughout the world. On 28.7.2010, the UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council recognized a human right to safe, accessible and affordable water and sanitation. On 30.9.2010, the Human Rights Council in Geneva adopted a resolution on 'The Human right to safe drinking water and sanitation'. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) too have helped generate political commitment, as their target on access to water and sanitation aims for a 50% reduction in the lack of access to improved water sources and sanitation facilities by 2015. Sanitation, both personal and corporate is a joint responsibility of the individuals, communities and the state. In India, there are multiple institutional systems, including departments and municipal and medical systems, meant to look after the 'sanitation'. By the time India became independent, mortality from epidemics (e.g. plague) had fallen sharply but diseases like fevers and gastro-enteric infections still took a heavy toll of people's health. The First Five Year Plan had noted that only 3% Indians then had toilets and most of the population lacked basic water supply, drainage and waste disposal services.

After independence, Central government set up a number of committees/ commissions such as Barve Committee (1949), Backward Classes Commission (1955), Malkani Committees (1957, &, 1966), Pandya Committee (1968-69). Some states set up similar committees. However, all these had the limited purpose of improving living and working condition of scavengers. While first three decades also saw launching of several national disease control programs, the first National Health Policy came only in 1983. The Central Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP) initiated by Government of India in 1986 interpreted sanitation as covering construction of household toilets, and focused on a single model (double-pit pour-flush) through hardware subsidies. Its effect remained very limited. Government of India then launched its 'Total Sanitation Campaign' (TSC) in 1999 aiming at universal rural sanitation (access to toilets) by 2012, the responsibility resting with the Panchayat Raj Institutions and the state and central governments acting as facilitators.

Government of India had launched the National Rural Health Mission in 2005. It converge sanitation and hygiene activities, household toilets and school sanitation programs. By 2011 sanitation coverage had reached over 50% over India (32.7% rural and 87.4% urban). Government of India and state governments as also some non-government entities, notably Dr. Bindaeswar Pathak's Sulabh International, have been working in order to promote sanitation in India. Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, inspired by the Gandhian movement for sanitation itself, comes as a message of hope and a very timely initiative taken by the Government of India. Gandhian movement for sanitation becomes a reference point for the attainment of the Swachh Bharat targets by 2019.

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