

Satyagraha to Swachhagraha

Following his return from South Africa in 1917, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi launched a satyagraha to counter the oppression of indigo farmers by the colonial state. The national movement to which Gandhiji gave definite direction incorporated the basic tenets of satyagraha (satya and agraha, meaning truth and its perseverance) and stressed the importance of education, the need to care for one's health and above all asserted the importance of sanitation. These elements were also the core concepts of the Vedic way of life.

In his first Independence Day speech, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) paid tribute to the Father of the Nation by renewing his pledge to make India free from the filth and garbage that had been piling up for more than 60 years due to poor governance. He took a solemn vow to realise the Mahatma's vision of cleaning up the entire nation. He launched a mission to ensure that India's villages, cities, temples, market places, residential areas, hospitals and tourist spots become clean and appealing when the nation celebrates the 150th birthday of the Father of the Nation.

This indeed is a challenge but it was the need of the hour. Littering had gone on for decades and turned our beautiful land into an eyesore. Poor sanitation is one of the key factors that undermine public health. A plague had struck about 24 years ago in one of the country's richest cities, Surat. It was caused by heaps of unattended garbage. People seemed to accept unsanitary conditions as an inevitable fallout of congestion. However, two of the most populous and most congested cities on the planet, Tokyo and Hong Kong, are as clean as any city in Europe. It was the flawed vision of those who ruled for so long that they never realised the connection between sanitation, hygiene and the poor health of children. It is beyond comprehension that no previous government ever thought of addressing this serious concern which according to the World Health Organisation is the prime reason for India's high Infant Mortality Rate (IMR).

The object of the sanitation movement launched by the prime minister was to protect the health of children and the nation as a whole. According to the WHO's estimates 1,17,000 children under five lost their lives in the country in 2015, primarily due to diarrhoeal diseases. Open defecation results in contamination of water because of which children cannot assimilate nutrients. Nearly 39 per cent of India's children record stunted growth. The chief of UNICEF's Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) project claims that poor sanitation costs India more than 50 billion dollars a year — this includes the cost of treating water borne diseases.

So, while launching the centenary celebration of the Mahatma's Champaran Satyagraha, the prime minister also rekindled the sanitation drive and reframed it as "From Satyagraha to Swachhagraha". More than 20,000 satyagrahis will carry the prime minister's message forward.

By doggedly pursuing the goal of Swachh Bharat, PM Modi has inspired a large section of the country's population to join the movement for sanitation. India's per capita expenditure on health used to be just 1.2 per cent of the country's GDP. It has now been hiked to 2.5 per cent. This alone will not transform the healthcare system. The key lies in strengthening preventive services. The sanitation drive is an essential part of this endeavour. A clean India, therefore, means nominal prevalence of gastrointestinal diseases such as typhoid, cholera and dysentery

Ancient Indians had a deep sense of personal hygiene. Excavations in Mohenjodaro, for example, have revealed the deep sense of hygiene and sanitation amongst our ancestors. Let me conclude by revisiting the Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. Goal 6 speaks of ensuring access to water and sanitation for all. The campaign launched by the prime minister has changed the perception of all Indians towards a crisis that occurred due to the neglect of sanitation and hygiene. It has captured the imagination of every Indian and many villages have taken to

sanitation on a mission mode. Protection of environment and nature was essential in the endeavour of our ancestors to preserve and promote health. yoga, meditation, and personal hygiene were the routes to achieving harmony with nature. The prime minister has rendered yeoman's service in bringing yoga to the fore in the international arena. The Green Good deeds I have conceptualised are a way to fulfill our green social responsibility.

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