

At The Half-way Mark

India is midway into the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM). Since its inception on October 2, 2014, the ministries of Urban Development and Drinking Water and Sanitation have been spearheading the programme, with implementation happening at the state level. The key differentiator with the SBM is the prime minister's ongoing focus which has percolated to district and block officials. It has also captured the imagination of the people of the country.

The SBM has witnessed several notable achievements in reducing open defecation thanks to the focus on behaviour change, need-based capacity building and constant measuring of outcomes. The last three years have seen an increase from 42 per cent to 65.02 per cent in national sanitation coverage. Five states, 149 districts and 2.08 lakh villages have already been declared Open Defecation Free (ODF). Nearly 22 per cent of the cities and towns have been declared ODF; 50 per cent of the urban wards have achieved 100 per cent door-to-door solid waste collection; and over 20,000 Swachhagrahi volunteers are working across urban local bodies, and over a lakh are working in rural India. The number of schools with separate toilet facilities for girls has increased from 0.4 million (37 per cent) to almost one million (91 per cent).

There have been numerous analyses, discussions and conclusions about the SBM. One recent media report mentions that the government is not measuring ODF, and rather tracks funds spent on latrine construction while putting out numbers about sanitation. This is not entirely correct, as there have been efforts to measure ODF. Of course, the modalities for the same can be debated and there may well be scope for improvement in the measurement protocols. Several sectoral experts are members of the Empowered Working Group (EWG), which is responsible for examining the survey methodology and setting protocols for the government's upcoming national survey through the Independent Verification Agent (IVA) under the World Bank project.

One of the key differentiators of the SBM programme (and rightly so) is the decision by the government in November 2014 to make ODF the success parameter. It was made clear by the ministries concerned that progress will be tracked and evaluated only on this basis. This caused a paradigm shift in the thinking of the implementers as ODF measurement has a direct relationship with behaviour change. This policy shift led to ODF Monitoring Committees (or Nigrani Samitis) being formed at the village level, reflecting the community ownership of SBM. The monitoring committees' key tasks were not to count the number of toilets but to ensure that no individual from the village resorts to open defecation. Anecdotal information and feedback from NGOs and others in the field suggests good progress on this front.

Sanitation, in a diverse country like India, encompasses a number of factors which are important determinants for the success of the mission. It has a direct relationship to caste, creed, religion and gender. A successful sanitation programme needs to address such factors, which makes achievement of safe sanitation a very complex exercise. Additionally, India has a large number of disabled people whose needs require customised solutions. Despite these challenges, we have seen a marked improvement in sanitation coverage since the launch of SBM.

Achieving ODF status alone is not sufficient for the success of SBM. Attention to the complete sanitation cycle is required, where toilets not only need to be built and used but the waste generated also needs to be collected and treated properly. The India Sanitation Coalition advocates safe and sustainable sanitation including design, implementation and practice. This is evident in the tag line BUMT (Build, Use, Maintain and Treat) to complete the entire sanitation chain. .

Achieving ODF is the collective responsibility of the entire nation, not just the government. We

have now reached a stage where the need for BCC (Behaviour change communication) has been recognised.

Turning a large and populous country like India around is not an easy task. However, in less than three years we see that India is already course correcting and with the momentum building, the pace of change going forward will be much faster.

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