

WHAT SWACHH BHARAT ABHIYAN IGNORES

Relevant for: Health, Education & Human Resources | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged to clean the “filthiness all around us”, which, according to him, is an obstacle for promoting the tourism that offers jobs to the poorest of the poor. Mr. Modi announced his government’s resolve to accomplish the vision of a clean India by 2019, on the 150th birth anniversary of Gandhi. Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) was an unprecedented nationwide initiative aimed to inspire the public to voluntarily clean public spaces as a service to the nation. The campaign initially highlighted images of celebrities “voluntarily” sweeping the streets, in protective gear. Circulated by a pliable commercial media, these images trended on social media. Concurrently, municipalities began to employ more contractual labourers — mostly scavengers forced into the profession by their caste — to remove waste.

This approach is an uncritical adoption of the 19th century Western model of removing waste from the public gaze. Although stopping the spread of disease was the primary intention in the West, sanitation is now largely an extension of visual aesthetics — sanitation means the absence of “filthiness all around us”.

The West introduced technologies to systematically remove waste. For example, when Londoners experienced the ‘Great Stink’ in 1858, the government realised that it would need a holistic sewerage plan, which would become part of the London water infrastructure, to remove filth and treat waste from the river Thames in a sustainable way. Soon, the construction of toilets in households and shops became mandatory.

The Swachh Bharat campaign hardly addresses a reworking of the underground sewerage system. This is a cause for grave concern, since many labourers have died recently while cleaning jammed manholes that open into the sewerage system. Most disturbingly, these deaths have a caste pattern. According to a reply by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment to the Lok Sabha in December 2017, over 300 cases of deaths due to manual scavenging, mostly from particular caste groups, were reported that year.

Punitive measures should exhort the public to learn where and how one should urinate, defecate and dispose of garbage. The campaign, however, burdens the contractual labourer with an ‘exclusive’ right to cleaning public spaces, while making it a voluntary act for the ‘public’ to not defecate, urinate or litter in random spaces.

In India, waste carries the stigma that is attached to pollution and caste, as does the process of removal (‘scavenging’), and the occupation (‘scavenger’). The waste remover in India is not a professional, like in the West. Also stigmatised are the spaces in which the removal takes place and where the waste is disposed. All of these are considered to be contaminated by caste pollution. In short, stigma resides in the profession, the labour, the body, and in the space.

In the past, municipalities erected bins in common places for shops and households to dispose of waste. These bins were the first to be removed, as the mission offered door-to-door collection. Workers are now expected to whistle to announce their presence upon arrival in their designated areas. Thereafter, members from the households bring unsegregated garbage, workers collect those in a sack, and store garbage in a designated place from where it is taken to the composting yard. The workers, as per the campaign, have to go to the yard to segregate the waste. Manually segregating the waste at the landfill compromises their hygiene and health.

The door-to-door service has darker undertones. Until they were banned in 1993, dry latrines were emptied through a similar door-to-door service. On arrival, the municipal servant would blow a whistle and the respective houses would move away from their toilet bowl or pots, which she would come to empty through an exclusive entrance. The whistle does not merely announce the presence of the worker; it also announces the presence of a lower caste body from whom all contact has to be avoided. The contemporary whistle echoes older practices, where members of the lower castes had to whistle, ululate, etc., while walking in public spaces in order to warn caste Hindus from crossing their paths. As much as the waste itself, it is the presence of the body of the 'scavenger' which is seen as polluting by the larger public. This notion has a spatial correlate — toilets are usually built away from living spaces; this is the case even today.

In Agraharams (exclusive Brahmin quarters), and even in some non-Brahmin households, for example, toilets are constructed behind the house so that the scavenger is 'unseeable' while walking down an 'exclusive' lane to the toilet to empty the bucket. Similarly, traditional Indian houses had toilets that were often located at the boundary of the compound with an exclusive path for the 'scavengers'. Clearly, Hindu notions of pollution on the one hand, and secular notions of stigma on the other, influenced the building of toilets.

This particular trait reflected in colonial architecture as well. The Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla, which was formerly called the Viceregal Lodge, has three entrances: one for residents and guests, one for servants, and one exclusively for sweepers and scavengers. The sweepers' pathways — which form an invisible and intricate network of corridors, stairwells and gangplanks leading to the many toilets in the building — have now been closed off. Significantly, in colonial Indian architecture, the scavengers'/sweepers' staircase did not intersect with the servants' staircase. The original planning document of the Viceregal Lodge has clear references to this secluded pathway.

It is significant that 'toilets' are not viewed as essential parts of buildings and public architecture in India. For instance, the Delhi Metro did not include toilets in all the stations in its original plan. It was only after a PIL that the Delhi High Court directed the Metro authorities to construct toilets and provide other facilities in all stations. This 'oversight' is only compounded by the location of the toilets. For instance, temples usually did not construct toilets. And when they are constructed, they are built away from the boundary.

Similarities between the secular SBA and the casteist form of manual scavenging are evident, but they have gone unnoticed. The secular sounding Swachh Bharat offers nothing but concealment of caste. The SBA enables a disjunction between the cleaning and disposing of waste, where the cleaning is a voluntary 'service' which caste Hindus are called upon to undertake, while collecting and disposing waste is a 'duty' relegated to municipal workers from particular castes. Any tangible achievement of a clean India is possible only if the stigma attached to sanitary labour, place and waste are critically addressed by caste-neutralising these professions and through adoption of technologies. Until then we are unlikely to succeed in any mission to keep our cities clean. Even if we succeed in putting up a façade of cleanliness, we need to remember that a clean village exists because an 'unclean' caste has absorbed all the 'filth' of the village.

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