

# NO SWEEPING CHANGE — ON SWACHH BHARAT MISSION

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

India's Swachh Bharat Mission is receiving global praise for attempting to close the sanitation gap of nearly 60% of the rural population not having access to a toilet at home in 2014. The NDA government invoked Mahatma Gandhi's vision of a clean and healthy country when it launched the ambitious programme. On the eve of Independence, Gandhi saw the lack of a "sense of national or social sanitation" as the root of all diseases among Indians. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a Swachh movement in 2014 to change that, and four years later the outcomes show that achieving social change is far from easy. For the BJP-led government at the Centre, the SBM enjoys arguably the highest priority, and a 16,400-crore fund was raised for it during 2015-17 when a special cess was in force. On Gandhi Jayanti this year, the SBM's Gramin wing declared it has constructed 86.7 million Individual Household Latrines and raised sanitation access to 94% in rural areas; 5,07,369 villages are now 'open defecation free'. On the face of it, this is big advance. But there is a need for a close audit of the outcomes. In some States, such as Rajasthan, independent verification shows that the social change that the SBM hopes to achieve remains elusive, and traditionally oppressed communities continue to manually remove filth from dry latrines used by the upper castes. There are reports of a similar situation prevailing in some parts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh too. What this shows is that the very evil that Gandhi wanted to see changed — of some castes condemned to do such work by others — persists.

Besides making sanitation a movement through the provision of well-designed toilets and behaviour change in rural India, the SBM should have a broader vision of what constitutes cleanliness. The Centre asserts that urban toilet coverage is now 87% of the target, and nearly three-fourths of the wards in the country have door-to-door collection of municipal waste, but the lived experience of the city-dweller, especially in the bigger metros, is different. Waste volumes continue to grow as economic growth spurs consumption. The laws on municipal solid waste, protection of water sources and pollution control are just not being enforced. The official machinery required to enforce legal provisions vigorously, and the infrastructure to manage waste scientifically are inadequate, making it unlikely that there will be significant public health outcomes flowing from high-profile cleaning campaigns. Without full commitment to these aspects of development, there is little chance of meaningfully achieving the Sustainable Development Goals on water and sanitation anytime soon. Besides ending manual scavenging, the Swachh Bharat Mission must ensure that the manual cleaning of septic tanks, which is killing so many workers each year, is stopped and that funds for rehabilitation reach them.

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