

Special Feature: "Swachhta Hi Sewa" Pakhwada

Swacch Bharat Abhiyan giving wings to Bapu's dream of Clean India



*Vikas Khanna

It will be a stock-taking exercise for the government when India celebrates Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary this year as it will also mark the completion of three years of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's flagship cleanliness drive – the "Swacch Bharat Abhiyan". The Modi government has set an ambitious target of Open Defecation Free India by October 2, 2019 when Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary will be celebrated.

Given the giant strides made in a short span of three years, the government seems headed towards meeting the 2019 deadline of providing toilets to every household. Under the Swacch Bharat campaign, more than 4.90 crore toilets have already been constructed since October 2, 2014. According to Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, more than 2.44 lakh villages have been declared open defecation free and 203 open defecation free districts as on September 24, 2017. What makes the programme noteworthy is that several public sector as well as private institutions have joined hands with the government to make it a grand success. Many business houses have adopted several villages in this connection under the Corporate Social Responsibility. It is no surprising then that the country's sanitation coverage has leapfrogged to more than 68 per cent compared to just 38 per cent in 2012. But still much more needs to be done.

Keeping this in view, the government has launched a fortnight long 'Swachhta Hi Seva' (Cleanliness is Service) campaign which will culminate on Gandhi Jayanti next month. Under the campaign, several programmes have been planned to give a fillip to the nationwide cleanliness drive. The purpose is to reinvigorate the "Swacch Bharat Abhiyan" which was started as a national

movement three years ago. The Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, which is spearheading the campaign, has been joined by various other ministries, government departments and non-government organizations to spread the awareness of cleanliness.

October 2, 2014 will go down in the history books as the biggest campaign for “Swachh Bharat” when Prime Minister Modi himself wielded a broom and swept the dirty streets of New Delhi. The people responded to his clarion call to join him in this endeavour to give a fitting tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, who wanted to make sanitation a priority for India more than a century ago. The campaign aims to end the wide-spread practice of open defecation, build more toilets and improve waste management, among other goals.

While underlining the importance of cleanliness, the Prime Minister has often said that the idea of Swachh Bharat has nothing to do with politics, as it is inspired by patriotism. One is reminded of Gandhi's saying that “Sanitation is more important than independence.”

While the father of the nation championed the cause of self-service in cleanliness and end the despicable practice of untouchability, the movement faltered after independence. Though several programmes were undertaken since then by several governments, it is a sad commentary that the twin issues of sanitation and untouchability continue to haunt the country even almost 70 years after Bapu's death.

Poor sanitation leads to several health-related diseases and untimely deaths. A charity organization “WaterAid” had painted a grim situation in one of its reports in 2014. It had then reported that less than a third of India's 1.2 billion people had access to sanitation and more than 186,000 children under the age of five used to die every year from diarrhoeal diseases caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation. It has its economic pitfalls also. It is estimated that the country is losing 6.4 percent of GDP annually as poor access to sanitation results in diseases and deaths. But all that is set to change now as various government agencies are working on war footing to meet the challenge.

Quoting the World Health Organization, the Prime Minister has said in the past that an average of Rs. 6,500 per person is lost in India due to lack of cleanliness and hygiene. He said Swachh Bharat would therefore make a significant impact on public health, and in safeguarding income of the poor, ultimately contributing to the national economy. He said sanitation should not be seen as a political tool, but should only be connected to patriotism (rashtrabhakti) and commitment to

public health.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which carried out a survey to estimate the cost of benefits of the Swachh Bharat Mission, has in a recent report said one rupee invested in improving sanitation helps save Rs 4.30. It said that each household could save Rs. 50,000 every year if there is Open Defecation Free society because the medical costs will come down, the value of time savings and the value of mortality will be averted. It also said the benefits are highest for the poorest quantile of the population.

But to make the programme successful, the local bodies and state governments will need to redouble efforts to create more awareness and educate people to change their age-old attitudes towards hygiene and purity. Despite best of governmental efforts, a large number of people in the hinterland still believe that it is unclean to defecate inside. The government and business houses may construct toilets, but one needs to draw people out from the open fields to the confines of a toilet in order to realize the full health and economic benefits of sanitation. There is an urgent need to educate people through awareness campaigns to help eliminate such negative notions. The success of the programme will be largely dependent on people's participation. It is therefore imperative that people rise to the occasion to make India clean and healthy.

**The author is a senior journalist and columnist. He has worked with several newspapers, news agency and television news channel in his 29 years career. Presently, he is a guest faculty at Indian Institute of Mass Communication.*

Views expressed in the article are author's personal.

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